



**KANNAZUKI**

I

The Beast Of Akune

**Yuka Miura**  
Illustration by Ameshin

# The Beast Of Akune

**The Kannazuki Series, Volume 1**

Yuka Miura

Published by Mogami International, 2024.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

## THE BEAST OF AKUNE

**First edition. June 21, 2024.**

Copyright © 2024 Yuka Miura.

Written by Yuka Miura.

Dedicated to my father, who always believed in me, and was taken  
from us far too soon.



**Kannazuki**

**By Yuka Miura**

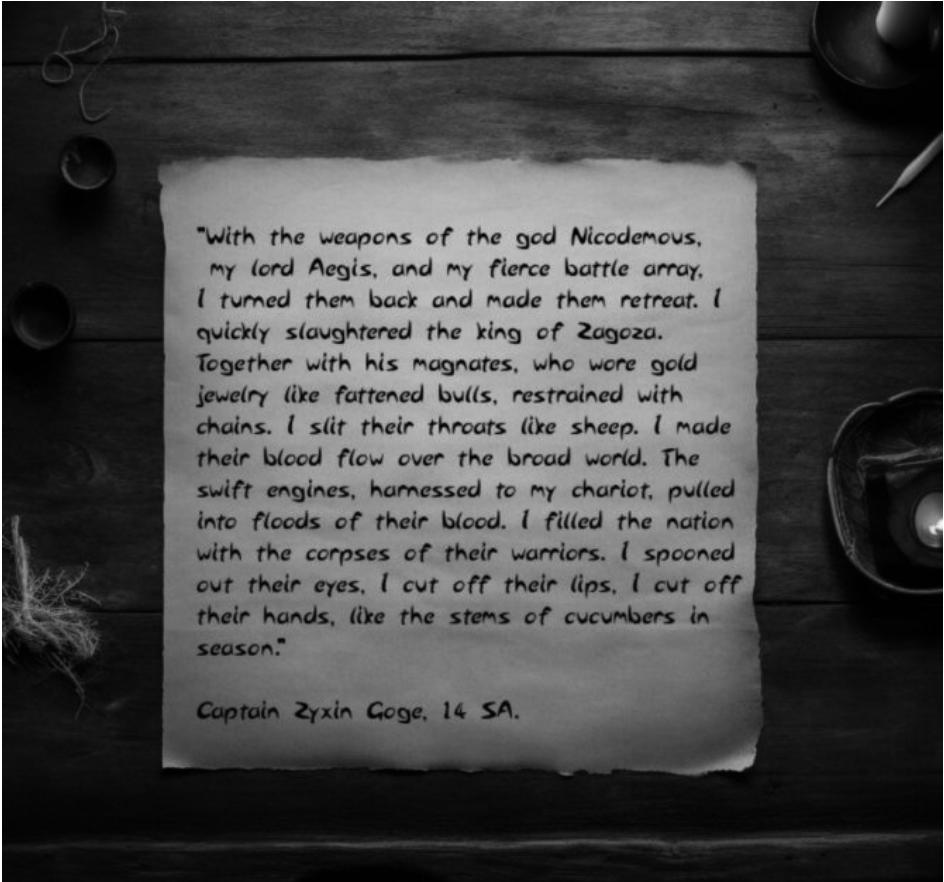
**Translation by Kaito Shumi**

**English editing by: Jess Bogdan and James  
Anderson**

**Art by: Ameshin**

# Book One: The Beast Of Akune





"With the weapons of the god Nicodemous,  
my lord Aegis, and my fierce battle array,  
I turned them back and made them retreat. I  
quickly slaughtered the king of Zagoza.  
Together with his magnates, who wore gold  
jewelry like fattened bulls, restrained with  
chains. I slit their throats like sheep. I made  
their blood flow over the broad world. The  
swift engines, harnessed to my chariot, pulled  
into floods of their blood. I filled the nation  
with the corpses of their warriors. I spooned  
out their eyes. I cut off their lips. I cut off  
their hands, like the stems of cucumbers in  
season."

Captain Zyxin Goge, 14 SA.

Where were we?

The Eden River, narrow and calm, flowed down from the old Desmore Hills. Split by a watermill, it spilled past ancient stone to a wooded valley and on to a place where the river bent along Akune's crumbling fortifications. It moved under the bridge of the West Gate, past the cemetery and out to the sea. Someplace far north, in the mountains of Toth, fed a river made to brim from endless sources and unfathomable springs. Early morning peasants toiled along its banks with one eye on the graveyard and the other on the open sea. This was the cage which subdued them – the promise of freedom and the folly of rebellion.

From these banks, as their daily tasks carried them back into the heart of darkness, they would gaze at that horizon and think of distant lands where men lived free beneath bluer skies.

Possibly for this reason, no one noticed a sharp flash of lightning on that summertide morning at the edge of the market district. Even as it split the cloudless sky, it delivered such a hushed thunder that if anyone had noticed, they might have called it polite. Abandoned shops and homes seemed to shine against its glare, only to fall back into shadow as reality parted to deliver a well-dressed gentleman.

The sun hurt his eyes and for a split second, everything seemed wrong. Any magic that involved translocation was dangerous, yet Goge had run out of options and been forced to flee.

Although these buildings limited his view, he knew the city to be Akune. How foreign it all seemed. Rising from the filthy pavement, he lifted his gaze to survey his surroundings. The sun had risen. Yes, his spell had been successful.

Glancing down at his hands, he took the time to brush shards of broken glass from his fine clothes. How long would he have? He set off for the administration buildings of the city center. He did not fix his eyes on the cemetery or the sea. Neither held his interest.

\*\*\*\*

Flour, sugar, salt, butter and milk. Put all of these together and a man can enjoy a biscuit. For some, these ingredients were hard to find. For others, impossible.

Depending on one's definition of the word 'Flour', they might be able to source a small amount before it was carted off.

Sugar was an entirely different matter. Even the smallest unsold supply could result in a private auction on board one of the many ships that found themselves in Akune's harbor.

Salt came from the northernmost parts of the Toth Kingdom and often passed by a great number of wealthy cities before finding its way here. Discovering a caravan that offered salt was the same as stumbling over a merchant who was allergic to profit. Despite how difficult all this may have appeared, butter and milk required outright theft.

The 'Black Oven Brotherhood' was a bakery that offered biscuits. A tiny establishment with crumbling walls and a thatched roof in dire need of repair. It operated just outside the North Gate. Contrary to the name, it was run by one man and his elderly mother. They charged five copper coins for a biscuit and it was a price so outrageous – that the city's price controls had effectively barred them from operating inside the walls.

Yet, Hammond knew he would be paying much more than five. He stood at the counter in his thick brown cloak, with a worn short sword on his belt and an iron badge hooked around the cloak's folded collar. He weighed nearly twice as much as the average Akunian and his clothing did a poor job of concealing his overly muscular body. His soft eyes had already apologized.

"One biscuit please."

"How dare you." Touma threw his rolling pin into a pile of other rolling pins.

Hammond averted his eyes and felt his shoulders sag. "I did not mean to."

"You pushed me to the ground."

"I did not mean to."

"Your friend laughed, yes? He laughed like you meant to!"

"He is not..." Hammond made an effort to stand up straight and look the baker in the eye. Despite being a skinny man, the baker was much older and his glare was too intense. It made Hammond uncomfortable.

"The Baron favors your friend so he can do what he pleases, yes? Only laws for the rest of us, yes?"

"Baudin is not my friend."

With a scoff, Touma turned back to the many trays stacked behind the counter and began sliding them out. "I know that. He needs someone to do the throwing or he would have to do it himself. Types like that have no friends. If the Baron says you owed taxes, then it would be you that gets tossed on the floor, yes?"

"You should have paid."

"Go away!"

Hammond uncrossed his arms and slapped both meaty hands on the counter. "These are not common bandits, Touma! They have the power of the king. If someone gets in their way..."

"If you bring that noble back in here I swear I will cut his eyes out!"

It was the kind of comment that might make your heart stutter. A special kind of fear that forces you to take inventory of your surroundings. The question of who might have heard those words and how far they might have traveled immediately entered Hammond's mind. The shopfront had only recently opened, and it was still early. As long as it did not happen again, it could be forgotten. "Baudin... Baudin is not a noble."

"He works for Baron Eckard, yes?! What does that make him?!"

"Please just pay next time. I won't always be around..."

Touma pointed to the door. "Get out!"

Hammond took his hands off the counter and clenched them at his side. There was nothing more that could be done if the man was determined to kill himself. Before he could turn and move toward the entrance's rickety wooden door, he heard a more composed voice speaking from behind the counter.

"And take this with you." Touma placed a small cloth basket on the counter.

"What is it?"

"Mother left it for you."

He was left alone with the basket when Touma returned his focus to the trays and brought two of them into the backroom. As if it were a gift, the basket's lining had been carefully folded over the top of each layer. He took a moment to quietly unwrap it as the unmistakable smell drifted up from the two biscuits inside. Hammond placed fourteen copper pennies on the counter. More than the price, but less than they deserved.

The aroma of dust and horse dung took the place of freshly baked bread as he exited the establishment and trudged back through the North Gate. Nor-

mally, he would wave and smile at his fellow watchman, but since this was the hour of shift change, everyone appeared to be quite busy.

Hammond's tenure on the citywatch had given him insight into the city's inhabitants. A merchant offering a gift was not uncommon. It was the biscuit equivalent of a promotional price cut, upgraded service, larger portion, or extra serving.

And the implication was unmistakable; they appreciated his company. No vendor would ever refuse some added protection. And if a pleasant attitude and some nice words were all it cost, they would do their best to invite it.

Hammond had made it a point to visit the Black Brotherhood Oven almost every morning due to its location. Hardly anyone patrolled the north road and because the establishment was outside the city walls, they were not guaranteed protection. Hammond would not always make a purchase and he would not always receive a gift. Yet, they had always been thankful for his diligence... until this morning.

He thought that buying the most expensive thing he could afford would be the best way to say "I am sorry." Yet Touma and his mother shared a personality trait that occasionally made things difficult: they were too smart for their own good.

They had not only expected his apology, they had also foreseen his choice and offered it as a gift. Providing him with two only served to break his heart. The way Baudin had acted was unspeakable, yet if Hammond had not been there it could have gone much worse; now he was forced to wonder whether this gift was intended to be forgiveness or a plea for mercy.

Hammond took a bite as he walked. It was delicious. The most extravagant thing he had eaten all month. Could it be poisoned? Hammond stopped in his tracks. No, no, of course not. How could he imagine such honest people doing something like that? He pushed it from his mind and continued on, savoring each bite.

Such amazing flavor. It was possible they had been baked with extra butter, though this could have just been his imagination. He promised himself that he would make his way back and give them another visit before the end of his shift. Perhaps Touma's temper would have subsided by then. Either way, it would give Hammond time to find the right words.

A small crowd gathered outside City Hall's service entrance. They dressed like laborers and spoke with the task-man. Hammond watched them suspiciously before entering the great chamber where the day guard would take up positions. The walls were adorned with portraits of kings long dead – ancient faces painted on canvas. Each bore different expressions: some angry, others proud. All wore simple crowns of the finest gold and silver.

The center portrait depicted King Silden and here, at least, he appeared stern and dignified. Not a hint of a smile revealed itself as he looked on without judgment or pity. The relief of the great hall's cool shade was much appreciated; the heat wave would only increase, if today was anything like yesterday. Upon entering, he was greeted by a few recognizable faces, mostly clerks and watchmen eager to start the day.

That is when Hammond caught sight of the man. White hair, well-groomed, thin and kind of short. He wore a black suit with a vest underneath and held an ornate cane in his left hand. The man, however, seemed to have no trouble walking, and as he ascended the stairs to the entrance, he carried it halfway up the shaft.

He was likely a foreigner, confused or looking for directions back to the dockyard. Or perhaps this fellow was a merchant who had been sent to pester the clerks. This sort of thing happened from time to time, fools would disembark their ships with the belief that they could simply march into the bureaucratic center of Akune and start demanding special dispensation.

Hammond cleared his throat loudly. "Hey!"

The man stopped at the double doors and turned to reveal the face of a much older gentleman. Deep lines creased around his eyes. The skin was pale – strangely, a little too pale for this climate. But there was no mistaking the striking blue color of his irises, or the scars that distance had concealed. Some lines were jagged, some were thick; it was enough to make Hammond wonder if a scoundrel had once tried to slash the man's head off.

"Walk back out. You can't come in here." A few of the other guards watched as he confronted the trespasser.

"I'm sorry, sir." An officer by the door involved himself rather than listen to Hammond's shouting. He wore the same brown cloak as the other guards, though the badge clasping one of its corners was made of brass, not iron. "We

don't allow any visitors in this room without special permission from council members."

"I do not require permission." The accent was strange and although the docks attracted a lot of accents this time of year, Hammond was certain he had heard it once before.

Another watchman moved to stand beside his superior, offering agreement. "Sir, we're not allowed to let anyone else in besides the clerks."

"Who governs this city?" The foreigner did not sound annoyed, so far as Hammond could tell. His voice was smooth and even. Almost playful.

He stepped forward to stare the man down, a sneer melting into feigned pleasantry. It was time to demonstrate the proper method for ejecting foreigners. "Hello there, my good fellow. I'll tell you what: since you obviously don't want to leave, how about I lock you in the rogue-house? We can talk then."

"Is this city run by a mayor? A lord? A king?" The man's tone had not changed.

"Aye, it is run by a lord. What is it to you?"

"I want to see this lord."

"You got an audience?"

"Yes."

The officer glanced at Hammond nervously. No one would lie about that – no one but an ignorant foreigner who didn't know where he was.

"Be straight with us. Do you really..." the officer said, leaning forward with a look of concern.

"No, no!" Hammond nearly pushed him out of the way. "This man said he has an audience with Lord Nath! You hold him here and I will go check with the clerks."

The officer leaned in again. "It is a serious offense to..."

"No, no, no! I believe him. Surely the scheduler will confirm it."

"I don't think Lord Nath is here today."

"Hold him here." Hammond turned toward the stairway which led up to the second floor...



Goge waited patiently for the guard to return.

The main hall appeared to have seen recent construction. All new wood, and yet the stonework was old and scratched. The portraits on the wall ranged from recent to more recent; it made him wonder how many times this city had changed hands in the last hundred years.

An exquisitely crafted bench next to the door allowed plenty of room beside him to lay down his cane. It was nice to relax after all of that walking, but he resisted the urge to close his eyes. The officer standing next to him shifted nervously, he was far too young to be experienced and failure to control subordinates had not gone unnoticed.

Time passed, perhaps an hour or less: Lord Nath emerged from the stairwell. He was a tall, skinny man with a goatee and thin mustache. He seemed to glide over the floor, dressed in exquisite materials and jewelry. Hammond trailed behind him with a troubled frown.

Throughout the hall, the guards came to attention. Goge snatched up his cane and stood to greet the pair. He wondered for a moment what the greeting ritual of this world had become. Waving? Bowing? Shaking hands? Did they still greet?

Lord Nath smiled and offered a small nod. Goge stepped forward and returned it with a polite bow.

"Are you the gentleman sent by the guild? I am afraid they did not give me much of a description."

"Apologies, Lord Nath, you have mistaken me for someone else. My name is Goge. I am back from a thousand year absence and I shall resume control of my city."

Lord Nath glanced at his guards. "Ha-ha! What?"

"Your services are no longer required."

The guards continued to stare in bewildered silence, leaving Lord Nath to return his expression with a gradual smirk and an awkward chuckle. "Ha-ha! Yes... I think I understand. A joke, right? Yes, hilarious, but I fear that I have made a late start this morning."

"I will allow you to remain in Akune."

"Ha-ha... quite humorous. I am Lord of this city... and you are not." The levity drained from the nobleman's features.

Goge held the cane in his left hand and stretched out with his right and cast a spell called 'Wither'.

Everyone startled at the sight of green lightning, which suddenly brightened the great hall. A loud crackling noise made their ears ring. Lord Nath collapsed as the spell flew from Goge's grasp and pinned the man to the ground. The nobleman screamed; his bones pulled apart by constricting flesh, yet no blood was visible. The wood floor beneath him turned black as his corpse grew still and began to sizzle.

Goge swung his hand shut. It was over.

"You were mistaken." He lifted his gaze from the charred body. Someone dropped a sword and ran from the room. The rest froze in terror, hands on their weapons. With two slow steps he approached the guard from earlier. "What is your name?"

The man's face had gone pale and with hands by his side, his eyes fixed on the body at his feet. "Y-y-you shouldn't..."

Goge stepped in close. "Breathe... Breathe deep or you are going to pass out."

The guard grasped at the edges of his brown cloak before finally settling on the belt that held his sword. He did not even seem to remember the blade was there. Another moment passed before his chest expanded and he took in a long audible breath. Then another. His trembling ceased.

"What is your name?"

The guard kept his eyes on the steaming remains. "H... Hammond."

"Hammond, please take me to Nath's former office. I am resuming my role as Lord of Akune." Goge made an effort to smile comfortingly, yet the guard did not lift his gaze. Instead, he stepped back and turned before leading them up the stairway. Goge could hear the commotion of men in chain armor scrambling for the exit before they ascended.

\* \* \* \*

The office was a mess, no doubt ransacked by bureaucrats and secretaries. Goge wondered if Lord Nath had ever set foot in it. Books and reports stood stacked on the desk, while shelves overflowed with papers and stamping supplies. A thin sheet of dust had been pushed from the door to the desk and from the desk to the shelves. It had the appearance of a chancellor's haven or perhaps a storage room.

"Ha! It is so small. I guess it is also fitting."

He seated himself behind the desk and leaned back against the lip of the window. Hammond remained at the door with a blank expression.

"No doubt there will be some angry people who wish to shout at me. When they arrive, please bring them here."

With barely a glance, Hammond departed. Goge spent the rest of the day dealing with paperwork. Accounts and edicts. The text required translation magic yet the contents were fairly straightforward. He arranged them into stacks according to things he would delegate and things he would eliminate.

At first glance, one might think that the city accounts were far too complicated for one man to address. This is what Goge referred to as the 'Illusion of Disorganization'. Things appeared chaotic on paper, but the true complexity was only visible once you understood the relationships between the unique elements of the structure. Simplicity came at the cost of removing everything that did not truly matter. Or to be more blunt, the people who did not matter.

He wished he could send out for lunch, but decided against it. Poison would surely find its way into any food the good people of this city would deliver. Patience seemed the better option.

A crowd formed on the street outside his window and he would occasionally detect the murmur of whispered gossip filtering up through the open window, yet he did not give in to curiosity, instead he continued to comb through the documents and ledgers well into the afternoon.

Hammond returned just before sunset with four men. They wore heavy plate armor and carried maces, swords, daggers, crossbows and other assorted weaponry.

Goge removed his reading glasses and folded them neatly on the desk. "If you have a civil mind, then let us speak."

An eerie calm descended. Tense expressions painted the faces of the watchmen as they glanced at one another. One stepped forward. He was a large man with dark hair and a mature face. He appeared to have something important to say. As it was probably a threat, Goge interrupted him before he could speak. "Please, introduce yourselves and have a seat."

They did not sit. But they did not draw their weapons either. The man's eyes scanned him carefully. "I am Teric, Commander of the Akunian Citywatch."

"Welcome, Commander Teric. I am Lord Goge. I understand that you were under the employ of the former land holder. What can you tell me about him?"

Teric's right hand flexed closer to the sword at his belt. "Lord Goge... Is it true that you murdered Lord Lorca Nath this morning?"

"Yes."

The group scowled at such a straightforward response and carefully changed positions. Even if they had wanted to surround him, it would have been impossible to spread out in such a small office.

"May I ask how?" Teric's question was a simple one, yet not something Goge had considered. He knew well that there were magic casters in this world – however, there was no way of telling how rare they had become.

"I do not see how that is relevant. Yet, if your curiosity requires satisfaction, it was with Necromancy. I am a Necromancer."

"Magic is illegal in the Toth Kingdom unless sanctioned by the Royal College."

"Akune is no longer attached to the Toth Kingdom."

Teric's lips parted briefly. Goge had been sitting for most of the day and had to suppress the urge to stretch his legs. On any other occasion he would not have hesitated, yet these men were poised to strike and anything might set them off. "This city has always belonged to me. I am grateful to the kingdom for managing this region in my absence. Now I have returned. Toth's laws no longer apply."

Teric leaned forward and placed a hand on the desk, a little braver now. "The King will not stand for this!"

"I suspect he will not. I suspect he will send an army to attack me. However, that does not involve any of you. Your job is to honor the oath you took to defend the people of this city."

"We swore an oath to King Silden. Not the city!"

"If you wish to honor your oath to him, why not continue to safeguard it until he arrives? There is no use in throwing your lives away against an impossible foe."

Goge had not meant those words as a threat, but as the commander stared at him from across the table he could see that they had certainly been taken as such. Teric removed his hand from the desk and stood upright. Rather than

continue this dialogue, he gestured to the others before filing back out into the hall.

And it was a wise move; Teric had sized him up without declaring his intention and would withdraw to plan his next course of action. Cooperation was still on the table, and yet, as he listened to the sound of their heavy boots making their way toward the stairs, he realized that could have gone better.

Goge stood up and stretched. It was evening. The sun was going down and still so much that remained to be done. He sorted through a few remaining documents, picked up his cane and found his way out.

The upper floor had been evacuated. Only silence welcomed him as he proceeded to the stairs and descended to the lower level. Lord Nath's corpse had been collected and the only remnant where it had been was a black stain across the hardwood floor. He speculated that the nobles were currently standing over it right at this moment, no doubt arguing over who's fault this was.

He stepped through the double doors of the entrance to find a horde of citywatch waiting for him outside. Their whispers lapsed into silence and glared.

In the distance he heard what sounded like thunder, but he knew it was just his imagination. If the citywatch planned to attack, he preferred they do it now. Goge transferred his cane to his left hand and calmly walked to the street as if nothing was wrong.

Not brave enough to step forward but too ashamed to step back, they did not attempt to bar his way. A horse-drawn carriage approached. Goge signaled with his free hand.

With at least thirty sets of eyes on his back, Goge paid the driver two silver coins and climbed inside. It was cramped, but comfortable enough. Brittle wood made up its walls and ceiling, interspersed with leather padding. Wobbly seats in rather poor condition were undoubtedly worse than they looked.

The horses pulled forward at a brisk walk, making the whole carriage bounce and sway. The driver seemed like a mild-mannered young man. Goge could see him through the little window in the front as he craned his head around. "That was a lot of people you had waiting for you. Are you some kind of prince?"

"No. I have never been a prince."

"Where will you go, sir?"

"The Temple of Mynar." The carriage made a quick turn toward the eastern streets. After only a few blocks Goge called for him to stop. Pushing open the door, he got out and scanned the surroundings.

The temple was ahead, its white stone gleaming in the darkness, a street where the wealthier homes transitioned into eastern slums. The well-swept streets still smelled sweet and inviting. Yet there was something decidedly wrong with this stretch of space. This world felt more real than his own, but as his eyes scanned the horizon he was sure he could sense...

He tipped the driver and asked him to wait. A long line of run-down buildings pressed against the north side as he scanned from east to west and an intense stare locked up his expression. There, a building that looked like it had once been a school was now being used as a beggar's home or...

The hours he spent translating allowed him to decipher this strange sign without the aid of magic. 'Akune Home for Children'.

\*\*\*\*

Lily shook as her eyes fell upon him. Heavy boots, shoulder width apart, marked a stance assured and immovable. The man was surrounded by the bodies of his victims. They littered the street in the thousands and stretched from one end of the city to the other.

Lily pulled herself up from the ground. Her nightgown was sewn from expensive cloth, sized to fit a child of her age yet it was not the sort of thing she would normally wear. Despite how filthy it had become, she recognized the fact that only a girl with wealthy parents would find herself sheathed in something this fine.

A voice from the shadows made her blood run cold. "What are you doing here? What is your name?"

Tears leaked from her eyes even though she knew they were useless. Dark clouds covered the shattered moon and poured over the city as if from a hole in the sky. A spark and a thunderous sound unleashed a torrent of rain. Lily lifted her hands as they began to turn red. It was blood.

"Do you understand? I am a beast. Absolute Evil." The wind picked up, and lightning cracked behind the Shadow Man. The liquid red separated like glass around his form as his voice echoed through the streets. It rang out like laugh-

ter, but Lily could hear no joy in it. An intense pain pressed her chest and she struggled to draw breath.

The Shadow Man's hand reached down and grabbed her by the hair. "You have completely wrecked my plans!"

Lily woke up with a start. It was less than an hour since she had lain down and Kenta was still awake. The boy reached across the tiny room to pat her shoulder.

"It's a bad dream..." he whispered.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed to plant her feet against the tile, but found them unresponsive. A falling sensation washed her to the ground.

"What's the matter?" Ritsu rolled over in her bed next to the door and opened her eyes.

"Shadow Man, Shadow Man is coming." Lily wrapped her arms across her chest despite being tangled in a ratty blanket.

Kenta shook his head at Ritsu and carefully climbed out of bed. Although still a young man, he was considerably older than Lily. He slid himself down next to her and put an arm over her shoulder. "You're safe here, Lily."

"I can feel it. I can feel it this time."

Kenta pulled her closer. "Shhh... Don't wake everyone up. It'll be fine, you'll see."

She looked across to Ritsu and the young girl smiled back. "Twas a bad dream, Lily."

The darkness of the room closed in on her. Only moonlight shone through the windows. She leaned her head against Kenta's shoulder and felt the call of sleep fast returning. After a moment she was nearly ready to climb back into her bed.

The feeling of dread returned with a vengeance. "No... No..."

"Shhh... it's alright." Kenta pulled her closer once again, but not even his warm embrace could soothe her this time. She felt her breath catch as it had in the dream.

"He's coming."

"Nobody's coming," Ritsu whispered with eyes half-closed.

Someone walked across the hall just outside the room, bending the ancient tiles upon each footfall. A sharp knocking sound erupted somewhere in the distance. Kenta looked up. The knocking came again, this time louder.

Ritsu opened her eyes a bit wider. "Who's that?"

Kenta waved her words away. "Nobody. A visitor for the caretaker or the headmaster."

Lily shook with fear. "– can feel him."

No longer knocking, a repeating banging vibrated through the building, only interrupted by the groan of the locks being thrown on the main entrance. Everyone was awake now and one by one the heads of children lifted from their beds. Kenta put both hands on the floor. "I'm going to stick my head out and see."

Lily latched onto him. "No! It's Shadow Man! I can feel him!"

"Stop it, Lily. There's no Shadow Man. Don't get the young ones upset." Kenta tried again to push himself up, but the girl refused to let go. With gentle hands he took a moment to pull free from her grip and slipped away. A few lumbering steps brought him to the door.

Lily closed her eyes, but the feeling was still there; a dark and sinister presence sat just stone's throw away. It moved quickly, crossing through the building and settling somewhere in the north.

Kenta opened the door and peered down the hall.

"What'd you see?" Ristu asked, still in bed but wide awake.

"Someone for the headmaster."

"Why are they here so late?"

"Don't know. Maybe... Maybe someone from the palace. Maybe they have news."

"Or food." Ritsu smiled and looked back to Lily, yet Lily's expression had not changed. Kenta closed the door and shot her a silly expression. After a few steps he stood next to her, but did not bother to sit again.

"Come on, Lily. Get back in your bed. It's just someone for the headmaster. I'm sure he will tell us in the morning."

Lily thought about standing again and decided against it. She wanted to climb under her bed, but she feared what Kenta would think of her if she did. She breathed in deeply and brought her legs in under her. Before she could stand, the staccato of running caught everyone's attention. It was followed by shouting and doors scraping open: crying, screaming, adults yelling orders and children yelping in confusion. The door to their room flung open and one of the few caretakers stuck her head in.

"Everyone in the corridor!!"

\*\*\*\*

The headmaster was a bald man, dazzled by coin; he moved up and down the corridor pushing open doors and barking orders. A few voiced their terror, but no attention was paid as the children were dragged from their slumber one by one. It was further down the hall, Goge could feel it.

The enchantment was so intense that Goge had to resist the urge to avert his eyes. A moment later, he froze. There it was. Not just one, but two. An unconventional power source concealed by a deceptively simple illusion.

Goge's glare fell upon the girl, she could not have been older than ten or eleven. The glamour was so thick he could see it ripple against the lamplight. He looked directly into her eyes and reached for one of the many pins hidden under his vest. It silently began its work and the illusion dissolved.

Gradually, the color of her eyes changed from green to dark brown and her hair from blonde to black. Two boney points appeared just above her brow. Horns... or at least they would one day be. She was a Domainer. An abyssal. A demon. Three things that were extremely rare on this obscure world. Yet that was not all she was.

Goge's eyebrows bent in confusion. "What is a red-sorc Nakiri doing here?"

The girl looked away. She was truly a child, the spell had not disguised her age, but this only served to further confound him. Who had cast it? How many demons were in Akune and why would they hide their young? These questions bubbled to the surface, yet time allotted to this detour had run short.

He gestured to the bald man. "This young lady is coming with me. As for you, we shall be merging the orphanage with the temple. And it will richly compensate you." He glanced at the other children, dressed in rags and staring back. "All of you."

As he took the girl's arm, she turned to her friends to see looks of horror painted across their faces. A few whispered pleas for help went unanswered as they watched her led away by this stranger.

Outside, they found the carriage still parked on the empty street and the driver pretending not to be curious. Goge waited for the child to climb into the carriage before following. The interior seemed just a little more cramped now

that there was someone sitting across from him. The demon child stared down at the scuffed wooden floor.

"If you value your life you will tell me where the others are. Do not mistake the truth or I shall become quite merciless. How many abyssals are in my city? Where are they? How long have you been here?"

The girl did not answer, instead closing her eyes.

Goge leaned forward, intent on raising his voice. "What is your name?! If you seek to test my patience then you shall find it short. This climate annoys me and I can think of no worse time of year to visit. Although this humidity was once tolerated, the memory escapes me and has left me miserable. I am absolute evil, a monster, a villain. A cold, heartless man who does bad things to good people and I have not slept in two days. Another hour and I may lose myself to madness. Speak!"

Her voice came as a whisper. "Lily. I am Lily."

They sat for a moment as the carriage bumped along the cobblestone streets. His eyes scanned up and down her terrible appearance, and it was only now that her odor was beginning to advertise itself.

One might assume the girl was tired, given her sagging shoulders and hands in her lap, but as Goge stared at her trembling form he realized that she was not difficult to read. This was the behavior of someone who had been dragged from their slumber to be screamed at by strangers, so it was safe to wager that she had very little idea of what was happening.

He glanced away and allowed himself to ease back into his seat. "Ignore my passion. You have wrecked my plans and although I am pressed for time I must keep my mind sharp. Not far from here there is a small temple that I had wished to visit. Under normal circumstances it would not have been an issue – however, the hour has grown late."

A quick close of his eyes only reminded him that he must remain awake. Daylight would come again, but not for the unprepared.

"Honestly, it is my fault. Making an earlier start would have been better, yet I resigned to wait for the citywatch to approach me. A mistake, perhaps. It was a conversation that needed to be had and yet it did not go as well as I had hoped. So here we are, out of time and out of place. It would not be wise to bring you to the temple in such a state... And I ought not leave you in the carriage because you are not trusted to remain inside."

Casting his eyes from the open window to the demon child, he caught her looking at him for a moment. Was her expression accusing him of something or was his mind being lost to exhaustion?

"Yes, yes, I know, why did I take you out of the orphanage if you were such an inconvenience? Well, I shall not have red-sorc Nakiri running around my city either."

Goge slapped his cane against the window. "Change of plans. Bring us to the best tailor in the city."

\*\*\*\*

The best tailor in the city turned out to be the only one still open at this hour: Mosasaur Bonin's Clothworks. It was a sprawling establishment seated on the second floor of a dry goods shop. More of a workshop than a place for customers, it was packed with barrels and looms, all clustered around empty chairs.

A well-dressed man met them at the door. "Sir... We sell in bulk, however, we do not provide delivery."

"I am Lord Goge of Akune. This is my slave Lily. She requires new clothes. I am a man of means and I need this done as quickly as possible."

As if on cue, two middle-aged women appeared from the back and folded up the objects they had been working on. "It would lead me to employ additional help."

"I am a man of means!"

"One, perhaps two hours."

Goge pushed Lily forward unceremoniously. "She requires a bath."

"That can be... Good sir, your slave has horns." The man's expression did not change.

"My slave is some type of elf."

"Yes sir, but your slave has horns."

"I believe it is time for you to see what I offer." Seemingly from nowhere, Goge produced a small satchel fashioned of dark brown leather and a clasp in the shape of a silver dragonfly. He held it open for inspection.

The man's eyes gleamed in the candlelight. "Nele, Sara, take this gentleman's slave upstairs and give her a bath immediately. Mind the horns, she is some type of elf. Wake the others, we start work at once."

Goge spied a lush sofa in the next room as the women descended upon Lily. They tried to be gentle at first, but her struggling forced them to carry her away.

"Would my lord enjoy a glass of wine while he waits?"

"No thank you, I am expecting someone. But I would be pleased to rest on your sofa."

"As you will, please excuse my absence."

The man bowed briefly and retreated to the office as Goge cast another glance at the crimson sofa. Even if he could have occupied himself with other pursuits, the couch's plush upholstery was irresistible. Closing his eyes for a moment, he sat on the folded plush surface, promising himself he would not sleep.

He awoke some time later. The man stood in the center of the room with a small army of workers. Hands wide, he presented a furious little girl. Goge allowed a few moments to appreciate what they had done. Her hair was shoulder length and neatly cut. Her skin freshly washed. She wore a black and white dress with tiny black shoes and a large silky black bow on top of her head. Or was that a hat? A hat shaped like a bow? Lily slouched. Her transformation had proved amazing, but the child was clearly annoyed by all the attention.

"I hate it." Their lingering expressions faded. "I commend your work. I trust that this style is the edge of Akunian fashion, but Lily is the property of your governing lord. She requires something which befits the honor of her station."

"Good sir..."

Goge interrupted him with a raised hand. "We will take this, yet I require something appropriate. I shall raise your fee to two hundred tani and give you another hour."

The man swiftly wrapped his hands around Lily's shoulders and led her back to the fitting room. Goge reclined on the sofa, unsure whether he had purchased a second attempt at a suitable appearance or another hour of bliss with such a comfortable piece of furniture. For a brief moment he wondered how much it would cost to keep the man at bay for the rest of the night.

Too soon—and Goge pulled himself back to the waking world. With an assortment of fine black cloth, they had sewn an elegant suit. Feminine yet professional, beautiful yet respectful. It was as if they had attempted to create attire in the style of his world.

Although the fabrics were different, it was easy to determine that she was connected to him based solely on how she looked. Shoes and pants that were

not overly complicated, a respectful neckline and a thin black coat wrapped it all together. It seemed as though the edges of the coat had been purposefully designed to cover a thin cloth vest just like his.

Bones ached as he forced himself to stand. "You have outdone yourselves. Please consider using your fee to hire more staff, as I shall be recommending your services to my court."

Lily and Goge left the shopkeeper to count his coin and crossed the darkened streets to a nearby inn. The first floor was a large dining area with wooden tables and benches. A servant rushed over to them and offered a thick leather menu with tiny symbols printed on the back. Goge retrieved his reading glasses to examine the selection.

"Lily, what shall you order?" Goge was starving. And still sleepy. He reckoned that if he did not get a hot meal and a proper bed, it might send him into a murderous rage. Lily was tired, yet her eyes sprung open at the smell of food. With a serious face, she examined the bill of fare. She held it upside down, however that did not appear to be an issue. Wait... Goge turned his menu right side up.

"I'll have chicken casserole."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you know how to read?"

"No. But I want chicken casserole please."

"Make that two."

They were disappointed to find the most expensive rental to be a two-bed single room. Now fattened by a heavy meal, Goge dreaded the idea of staggering around the city in search of better lodgings.

He swung the door wide and set the lamp holder on a dented table. Lily secured the bed by the far wall while Goge examined the bed in the center. It was soft and stuffed with cotton, compelling him with a siren's song. He deactivated a limited invisibility spell that hid the equipment he wore. His clothing changed with a soft shudder to reveal a satchel, a bandoleer of wands, a cape with a golden symbol embroidered on the back, and a container for his cane.

Lily stared with unblinking eyes as the decorative pins on his vest brightened into view. Tiny jeweled figures lined the fabric in rows. Symbols, insects, drakes, and various animals appeared to be crafted from simple base metals, yet most were adorned with gold and precious gems. Goge removed it all and stacked it next to his bed.

He held his fist in the air until it glowed with a sickly green light. Black smoke rose from the floorboards and moved to the door of the room, licking up the sides and consuming it in shadow. Lily stared in awe as she crawled onto her mattress.

"What is that?"

Goge fell face first onto the bed nearest the door, momentarily muffling his words. "A shade. It will watch over us for the night. Stay away from it."

Lily watched a few moments more as thin red eyes appeared beneath the writhing smoke. She climbed under the covers and hid her face, hoping that if she could not see it, then perhaps it could not see her. Shadows washed across the floor and filled in the cracks of cheap furniture until finally finding its way to the lamp holder. The flame sputtered and died.

\*\*\*\*

The body was finally cold.

At the North Gate Garrison, Teric's men had covered it with a sheet and placed it on a table in the backroom. A tall man with a neat beard, a long nose and piercing blue eyes was the first to approach. He was Baron Eckard, and the only faces he knew how to express were serious ones. "How could this happen? Where was citywatch? Why did they not defend him?"

Teric glared. "They... This happened at the administration building. At least five watch in the main hall and another ten around the offices, he had plenty of protection. Magic is what killed him. My men are not..."

Eckard shook his head. "Your men just stood there and did nothing?"

"My men saw him use magic. What would you have them do?"

"Something. Anything. Surely they could have stopped this."

Teric scowled and straightened his posture. "How?! The only mages I know are either foreign dignitaries or appointed by Toth. This Goge person is dangerous. We do not know what he is capable of."

A younger man named Park took up a position alongside Eckard and leaned in to examine the shrouded body through spotless spectacles. "A myth, Goge is a myth from the age of the second empire. He was never real."

Baudin entered, leaving his entourage in the hall outside and raising his voice. "Real or myth, everyone is in a panic right now. They would point a finger

at any storybook villain. However, I think you might agree that this 'Lord Goge' is a strange choice."

"Then who is he really?! It is said that this man speaks with an accent. Could he have come from the docks? Arrived from the island kingdoms or some far away land?" Eckard glanced back at the bold gaze of this newcomer.

Baudin considered the question. "Well, it would explain why he is unrecognized, but not why he hated Lord Nath. Foreigners with local interests are too rare to be suspected."

Teric stared at the corpse, unable to lift his eyes. "I was face to face with him. He may not be who he claims, but he calls himself The Lord Goge. 'Says he owns the city."

Eckard shrugged. "That makes little sense. Why impersonate someone so obscure? How old is this myth?"

Park leaned in to repeat himself. "Around a thousand years. The mage kings of the second empire used stories of Goge to keep each other in line. It shows the ignorance of this man, claiming to be someone so old. Not even the oldest of elves live so long and by all accounts, our impersonator is human."

In walked another: Baroness Hana Stella, an older woman straight from the highest levels of the Akunian aristocracy. Apparently hailing from a quite different occasion, she wore a wonderfully expensive blue and gold ballgown with her hair arranged by the best dressers in the city.

"If he arrived by ship then how do we know this is not a plot from the Oceanic Council?"

On a normal night, most of her peers were happy to see her, but from the angry glares she was drawing it was safe to assume that her speculation was not appreciated.

"With respect..." Park gave a quick bow in her direction. "For me, it is difficult to understand what a foreign power would hope to achieve. When it comes to plots of this nature, the Toth kingdom is not typically a target, and especially not a city of this size."

"This size?"

Eckard grumbled and tried to wave her question away. "Tiny. He means small and insignificant. What could they possibly gain? Kill Lord Nath? They would not recognize the name."

Teric sighed. "There is no sense in guessing. Whether his claims are true or not, this is what I can report: He killed Lord Nath in front of witnesses. He used magic to do it. We met with him and he threatened us. I set men to follow him, but we do not know how to proceed against someone like that."

The baroness glared at Teric. "Lord Nath was no commoner – something must be done. We are talking about the murder of a King's Vassal. Large or small, he held a title. When the court hears of this..."

Eckard kept his eyes on the body as if he were still searching for clues. "I agree. And it falls to me to take action. This man should be executed immediately."

She crossed her arms. "Only trouble would come of that. And you have no right to extend your authority over the city – only myself or Vassago are capable."

"The King would not stand for such bickering! He would demand swift action and we both know he would demand it from me. It is better to put this animal down as quickly as possible."

Baudin shifted nervously. "How would it look to his Majesty if you removed Nath's killer? He might assume you were trying to silence an agent."

"His Majesty would never accuse me of such a thing, he knows of my loyalty and would agree that this should not stand!"

Stella's voice rose to a pitch that was slightly less comfortable for those present. "Perhaps he would, yet others may decide to examine your recent investments."

Park swept under a fleeting look of surprise that the Baroness should mention that, but Eckard clenched his fists and turned. "Are you accusing me of being in league with this criminal?!"

"Am I surprised?!" The voice of a young man echoed from the corridor as the door swung open to reveal a figure dressed in a fine suit of silver and gold. A red trim cape hid his hands. "Lord Nath was slain, and you worms are already fighting."

Relief washed over Eckard's face. "Rav, I thought you departed last night."

The mage known as Rav approached and raised his hands up for dramatic effect. "I had. I made it as far as Wolfpine before turning around. Seems my carriage was slower than the news."

"Does the king know?"

"By now? Undoubtedly."

Rav stepped up to the table, seized the edges of the sheet in both hands and pulled it from the corpse. Everyone recoiled at the sight of the charred body. Stella and Park covered their mouths.

Eckard shook his head. "Rav, what do you make of this? Was this magic?"

"The spell was over-cast and ran too hot for a single target. He was cooked solid before he hit the ground."

Eckard tried to keep his composure as he stared at the blackened remains. "Can you slay this man?"

"Not without a precept. Am I stupid? I require that Commander Teric declare this 'Goge impersonator' a rebel."

Rav's eyes darted to the commander, followed by everyone else's.

Stella shook her head. "This is ridiculous. If we are incapable of performing a capture then we should leave him for now."

"Are you suggesting we ignore a threat to the crown?" Park countered.

"I am suggesting that no one knows what is going on and there is no reason we should not set the citywatch upon him. If he is taken alive, then we can find out who set him to this task. Why do you oppose this?"

Rav draped the sheet back over the dead man. "He apposes it because only Lord Nath could have given that order. Wielding the king's power without right would see you summoned for examination. Yet, with a precept from Commander Teric, I can kill this man as a mage of the royal college. We put aside his crime of murder and engage him for his illegal use of magic."

Stella blinked. "And what if you fail? What if he wounds you and turns his attention on..."

"Do you think me a novice? It would require more than some delusional peasant to defeat me. To prevail against a true college mage, he would have to be the genuine Goge."

Teric cleared his throat, and the group turned to face him. "If we fail to capture him... you will have it."

\*\*\*\*



アメン  
**NINA**

Nina was a beautiful young woman with long blonde hair, blue eyes, pale complexion and a mischievous grin. She was slender and yet rarely graceful, a person who would glide across the floor only to stumble over her own two feet. Not a standard city squatter, none would find her choice of clothes on a rack in the market district. She wore a soft leather skirt that did not reach her knees, a wrinkled blouse and a man's belt. In the last five years, a cobbler had fixed her worn boots several times, and her hair was tied with a thin cord of cowhide rather than a ribbon. The only thing she owned to which anyone would pay the

name "fancy" was a small gold locket that encircled her neck, yet upon inspection one might question its value as well.

The fountain in front of the library served as an adequate bench, and this late in the evening it made for a quiet place to sit. Ink from her latest journaling session stained her fingers.

Nina often wrote for hours at a time. Thoughts. Feelings. Dreams. Everything, from what she saw to philosophical meanderings and poetry. When she ran out of words, she would sketch.

Hammond emerged from the darkness and passed closer to the library. He was still on duty, wearing his faded brown cloak with a large iron badge clasped to the collar. Nina put away her journal and quill after seeing him and wiped her hands on a clean rag. It was time for dinner. Hammond joined her on the fountain's edge and began nibbling at the bread she had set out.

"You always have the best food. Where do you find this stuff?"

She opened her basket and produced a tiny bottle of wine, no larger than a fist. The library had food delivered for the staff, but today it came with a little something extra.

He cast a suspicious eye. "What's this?"

She poured him a mug of red liquid. "Something special. Do not hasten your drink, they make these bottles so small."

He gulped it down and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Wow. This is good. What's it called?"

"That is the best part! Look at the markings on the bottom of the bottle. It's from Koko village."

Hammond tipped the bottle to see the markings underneath. Nina's smile had infected him. "Koko? Are you kidding?"

"Can you believe it?"

"Things must be getting better if they are making wine again."

"Every day, it seems. Things get a little easier."

"I wish that..."

She searched through her basket for more bread. "You wish what?"

"Did you hear about Lord Nath?"

"Yeah. I heard a merchant attacked him."

"More than that. He's dead and I saw the whole thing. This foreigner came to City Hall and hit him with magic. It was like green lightning. Scared the hell out of everyone."

Nina set a slice of meat between two pieces of hard black rye. "Maybe now the farmers will get a few extra days to harvest before the taxes are called."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. When people hear he is dead and not injured – I bet they will celebrate from Tamworth to Callow."

Hammond lowered his voice and leaned in closer. "I wish... I wish it had been Eckard."

She refilled his mug and pinched off a small piece of the cheese for herself. Nina had hoped he would take it all with him, but this type of cheese proved far too addictive. She held up a piece for inspection. "I do not know what this is called. But I could eat an entire wheel of it."

Hammond raised an imaginary knife. "If I stabbed Eckard tomorrow... do you think I could convince everyone that Goge did it?"

"Who?" Nina tried not to talk with her mouth full. Unsuccessfully.

"The foreigner."

She took another piece. "That name sounded familiar."

"Does it? Did you date him or something?"

Nina leaned over to hit the big man on the shoulder. She had to do it twice so he would notice.

"Hey! Stop that, I'm an officer of the watch! I'll drag you off to the gatehouse for assault!" He pushed her away with a playful sneer.

"The nobles wouldn't allow it. I know all their secrets." No sooner had the words left her mouth than Hammond's smile disappeared.

"Don't joke about that. Nina. I am being serious right now, don't joke about that." His eyes darted up and down the street reflexively, but no one was around.

"I was only teasing." She turned and placed her boots on the ground for a moment. With her hands by her sides she gave him her best puppy dog look. "If you said that to the people you work with..."

"Would it be so bad? Then you would have to run away with me."

Hammond rolled his eyes. "Ah, this again."

"Well, would it? Would it be so terrible just to leave and forget the debt?"

He took another draw of the wine and let out a moan of appreciation. "Eckard would hunt us down for sure. Forty-four silver. That is all I owe. We are so close now."

"I know."

"Nina, a year. Or maybe two. Then we are working for ourselves. We can go to the docks and sail away."

"I know."

"We can work the trade lanes for some of the larger ships and get passage to Teras or Brinn. We'll be free of this damned city and start over somewhere better. But we have to do this the right way. I don't want to be looking over my shoulder everywhere we go. That's no life. We would never be rid of him, he has friends at every port. He will find us, Nina."

"I know."

The night grew colder and light from the shattered moon filled the square. Nina stifled a shiver, but Hammond noticed. He stood up and collected a few pieces of shortbread to put in his waist pack. "You should get home. Get some rest. There is a call to arms tonight, so I won't be back until morning."

Nina's expression turned to concern. "A call to arms? Why?"

"The foreigner. Commander Teric met with the nobles and came up with a plan. If it works out, there could even be a bonus involved."

"You won't be in danger, will you?"

"We're all in danger until we bring that spellcaster in. But no one is more important to Eckard than me. He won't risk losing his debt payments by sticking me at the front. Besides, Goge will have to be on guard with me around. I'm sneaky."

Nina stood up to see him off. "Show me how sneaky you are by not getting hurt."

"I will. Get some rest, Nina. And thank you for another lovely dinner." He smiled and started back down the street.

"Have a care! Who will I feed if anything happens to you?!"

"Yourself, for a change! Don't worry, I shall keep you from growing fat!"

Nina packed up and got ready to head home. Yet she couldn't help but linger a few moments as she watched him walk away.



### アメシン SHADE CONSTRUCT

Goge woke to the sound of splintering wood, he slowly turned his gaze to Lily and found her perched on top of her mattress, staring back. She had already dressed and appeared to have been awake for some time.

Her voice was calm and practiced. "There is someone at the door."

The old man hobbled onto his back and shielded his eyes against the daylight. From the window, he could not tell how much of the morning he had slept through, but midday was not far off. Goge forced himself to climb off the bed as sounds of battle raged from the hallway. He rubbed his eyes and took a moment to lean against the wall.

"Get help!" someone screamed.

Goge looked down at his belongings and carefully began collecting them. With no mirror in sight, he wondered how crazy his hair must look. He finished reattaching his equipment by activating the limited invisibility pin, which obscured most of the important bits. Lily was still staring.

"Are you ready to go?"

She nodded.

"Alright, let us proceed. I have one stop to make, but then we are off to the palace."

Lily followed him to the door, which lay in several thick pieces. Two city-watch huddled amidst the wreckage, nursing their broken bones. In the hallway, the shade was pushing against a column of armed men. The creature's long arms battered the watchmen into walls before herding them back in the direction they had originally approached; as of yet, the men seemed incapable of inflicting any damage upon this raging creature.

Goge carefully stepped over the broken wood and looked back to Lily. She was too short to step over it. One man shouted a string of threats from the floor. Despite a shattered nose and bruised eye, he still had the strength to hurl obscenities. Goge gestured to Lily and carefully lifted her over the debris before taking a moment to properly inspect the corridor. A trail of brutalized men traced from the room toward the shade – now reaching the end of the hallway.

"Wicked rotter – going to kill you!" one watchman yelled.

Goge carefully avoided the man and set Lily down next to him. A dazed combatant stumbled into Goge's path with arms flat across his ribs. Without a second thought Goge grabbed the man by the shoulder and pushed him down. The shade halted its attack with a whistle from its master. After a quick gesture the shade blurred slightly and vanished into a cloud of smoke, a haze so thick that it seemed to fill the corridor.

"Stay close, Lily." They proceeded through the darkened hall as it echoed the cries of the wounded, down the stairs and out into the city streets. It did not take more than a few steps before they arrived at a row of shops.

And at the end of the block, there sat a small bakery. Large windows revealed the massive ovens inside, and a door had been propped open as if on invitation.

Lily adopted a nervous expression as she gazed at the bakers inside. "Am I to work here?"

"No, stay close. This shall take a moment."

They walked in and quickly assessed the options. Lily inhaled the fragrances as they approached the counter. Goge took a look around and noticed a young woman working with dough. He waved to her and motioned to the display.

"What shall you require, sir?"

He pointed to one of the top racks. "I require twenty of those."

She set down what she had been working on and quickly filled an empty flour sack with an assortment of the round bread.

Goge handed one to Lily. "Bagels. We had these in my world too. Not quite an effective breakfast, but they are enjoyable."

Lily bit into the bread and was quick to follow it up with another. The old man bit into one of his own and collected the sack with the rest. Finding a carriage at this hour was easy. He let her have the rear seat while she finished her meal.

"Where are we going now?"

"We are going to meet a man who lives at the temple. Listen carefully, I need you to put this on." After a few moments of searching through his satchel, he produced a thin piece of cord with two tiny brown skulls laced through the center. It appeared to be a necklace; however, the young girl could not fathom why someone would want to wear something so hideous.

She folded her arms defiantly. "No."

"You will do as I say or I will stop this carriage and lash you." Goge held it out. The cord itself was an ugly piece of uncured leather, but the two tiny skulls had a thin shine around their edges.

She turned the skulls over in her hands. "What kind of animals are these?"

"What kind of animals?" Goge repeated.

"What kind of animals are the skulls from?" Lily could swear she felt a vibration coming from the one on the right.

Goge tucked his satchel back into the invisibility field under his arm and pointed at the necklace. "They are carved from wood. Put it on."

"I don't want to."

"I did not ask if you wanted to."

"There is something wrong with it." The skulls were relatively mundane in appearance, but she found it hard to look away from them. Goge leaned forward and grabbed her by the belt of her skirt. With a pair of quick hands he tied the necklace to one of the belt loops.

Goge sat back on his bench and replaced the cane across his lap. "There, never take it off. Keep this on you at all times, do you understand?"

"Why? Why must I wear it?"

He rolled his eyes. "It allows me to know where you are. Do not for a moment believe you can evade me by simply removing it. If, even for an instant, I

do not know where you are, I shall summon a ghast and task it with dragging you back. Regardless of how cruel you think of me, be assured that no mercy exists in such a creature."

She glared as if she would soon strike. "What are you?"

"I told you already."

"You said you were a monster."

"Yes."

"What kind of monster?"

"The very bad kind."

"Are you the Shadow Man?"

Goge's eyes darted as he attempted to recognize the term. "No idea what that is. What is a shadow man?"

"Are you a demon?"

"No." He paused again after answering. It had been a fair question, but it made him unsure of whether or not Lily understood what she was. "I am human. No doubt the cruellest you have ever had the misfortune to meet."

The carriage finally arrived at the temple. The white stone building seemed radiant from a distance. Up close, it would take a blind man not to see the dirt and neglect. Half-crumbled statues flanked the main entrance. All but one of the steps were in dire need of a mason. Or perhaps a wrecker.

They disembarked the carriage and made themselves presentable. Lily took a little longer to brush down the folds of her new clothes. "Do you eat people?"

Goge pondered this as he scanned the yard. "No more questions."

"Do you drink blood?"

"Certainly not." He started toward the entrance. Lily staggered before she could follow, the new shoes making her unsteady. "No talking when we go inside. I need to find this David fellow."

Just inside the door, two acolytes swept the stone tiles of a large mosaic. Goge looked over the images, but could not recognize any of them. Ships. The ocean. The sky. People and sunbeams. Truly a work of limited skill.

Although the entrance had been left in a state of invitation, none of the priests showed an interest in visitors. A young man with stringy hair stood beyond the door. He was tall and thin, dressed simply in a brown robe, and led three others in sweeping out the presentation hall. "Excuse me. I seek the archpriest known as David."

The man paused and held his broom at the ready. "Father David does not receive visitors. I am Joon, may I be of service?"

"I need to speak with him. My name is Goge, Lord of Akune."

Joon's eyebrow rose after the mention of a title. "Father David is unavailable. Please do not take offense, but the archpriest is too busy."

"I am not offended, yet I suspect you underestimate my talent for bribery."

The man suppressed a thin smile. "Sir... I have no doubt that you are talented, however, Father David remains unavailable."

Goge set the tip of his cane against the floor and held out the thin white sack with the symbols for "Flour" written on the side. The priest made a puzzled expression and patiently watched as the bag's contents were revealed. The smell of freshly baked goodness slowly filled the room.

"Actually, I think you are right. This demands his attention." He accepted it with a smile and his associates paused their morning chores to seemingly present themselves in case Joon required their assistance with carrying such a heavy bag.

Although their aid was not required, they were permitted to trail behind as the group proceeded through a set of double doors and down a long hallway. Passing through an empty kitchen and beyond a variety of locked rooms along darkened halls, they arrived at the rear of the temple. With little ceremony, they found themselves delivered to a small room with a window and the priests abandoned them to a young man inside.

David wore the same brown robes as the others, but with a colorful vestment across his shoulders. He was much shorter and thinner than Goge had anticipated, with light brown hair that had clearly gone uncut for some time. He sat idly in a large chair at the window.

There were enough books to fool one into thinking it was a library, but it was really just a storage room. Little book mountains, some only waist-high, crossed here and there while others looked like they'd recently fallen over. Goge painted a smile across his face. "Are you the archpriest I have read so much about?"

"I... I am David. I oversee the... the temple here in Akune." David folded his hands in his lap, but soon decided to rise in greeting.

"I am Lord Goge."

"One of... one of my brothers announced you but I... I did not... not believe he had... pronounced it correctly. Is it Goge?"

"Goge, yes."

"Well, we are glad to have you here in the Temple of Mynar."

"This is my slave, Lily." Goge gestured to Lily, who quickly dashed to his side and gave a low bow. David quickly returned it with a nod, yet his eyes locked on her forehead.

"Your slave has horns?"

"Yes... She is a rare breed of horned elf."

"Mmmmm..." Lily let out a disappointed moan.

Goge glared in response.

"...really." The priest gestured to a larger seat next to his window and cleaned off some books, of which many piled it full to brimming. His smile shifted nervously as Goge sat down across from him. "Please pardon the mess."

"David, what god do you worship? It was not mentioned in any of the documents I inspected."

"Documents? I.... well yes... I worship Mynar. This is the Temple of Mynar."

Goge tried to keep his attention, but David was staring at Lily's horns again. "Please forgive my ignorance of local customs. Archpriest? Sage? Guide? How would you prefer I address you?"

"Father David is fine. We do not use titles as much as some sects do."

"Very well, Father David, are you aware that I have replaced Lord Nath?"

"W... what? How? When?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Why would you do that?"

"I require Akune and I feel it is my right to retake it."

"You... Do you really claim to be Goge? Goge of Qar? Goge the Mage King?"

"I was never a king."

"That is... impossible."

He shrugged. "It would seem that it is not as impossible as one might initially believe."

"How can you be alive?"

"I do not age. Not anymore, at least."

David blinked. "Sorry... forgive me, I do not wish to offend..."

"Proceed."

"Well, it is not my intention to upset you, however I feel that I must ask..."

"Yes?"

"Please do not be offended by my question..."

Goge glanced at Lily and back to David before fixing his posture. A playful smile appeared. "I suspect I may soon be insulted."

"I hope not. Because it is not my intention."

The priest increased his breathing as a frantic expression began to descend. Goge leaned forward and grabbed the man's wrist. It was a friendly gesture, a display of concern, which seemed to take David by surprise. "Calm yourself. There is no way to know how it will be taken. Ask and I will endeavor to be patient."

"Is there a way in which you can prove that you are this person?"

Goge pressed his lips together and leaned back into his chair once again. His eyes wandered for a moment. "I had not considered it until just now. Do you know of anyone who might recognize me?"

"Anyone who might recognize you would have to be over a thousand years old. Even among the elves there are very few who live... and elves rarely travel to our corner of the world."

"Just as well. I did not associate with many elves back then."

"Might I also ask... where have you been this whole time?"

"Around."

"Surely someone would have seen."

"I was noticed by those I chose to associate with. Yet I doubt you and I would associate with the same people. Father David, would it truly matter if I was or was not this person? As a matter of trust, I can understand why you would seek the answer, yet it should be undisputed that I claim to be him. Also, I have assumed governance of Akune. For our purposes, at least, should that not be enough?"

David stared for an uncomfortable length of time. "W... What do you intend?"

"I would like to invest in your temple."

"You... you want me to give you the temple?"

"No. It is nothing like that. I simply want to support your efforts. Your cause."

"My cause..."

"To spread the worship of Mynar."

"You asked me who I worshiped. You asked me who this Temple is... who this Temple is dedicated to. Because you did not know. Why would you support us if you do not know our cause?"

Goge found himself considering his next words with great care. He took a long slow breath. "I spent most of yesterday scouring city reports for mentions of your name. I want to restore this city to its former glory. Yet this is not possible with corrupt nobles who sell farmers into slavery and lords who report shipping manifests to pirates. Every single merchant in this city pays half their income to a wasteful institution and ends up in the gutter if they have a bad month. I will be straight with you, David. I do not need Mynar. I need someone that would rather starve than abuse a man's trust. I need someone who the people can put their faith in. Someone who can represent them. Someone who can speak for them. That man is you."

"I am flattered. But I think... I think..."

"Then allow me to proposition you. If the Temple took in every orphan and vagrant in the city, how much coin would you need to operate for a year?"

David drifted. "A lot. One hundred gold tani every week."

Goge stood up and gave a nod. "Then it is done. As of tomorrow, City Hall will open an account for your temple with the sum of ten thousand tani."

The priest nearly fell from his chair. "Ten... thousand?"

"Ten thousand. When people learn of your services they will flood into the city. I suspect you are underestimating just how ambitious a venture I intend."

"I... I cannot promise anything. If... if you can provide such coin, then... I will see what we can accomplish in... with that."

"Excellent."

With the meeting concluded, Goge turned to the door and gestured to Lily. She seemed intent on giving a departing bow of her own, yet there was little room to maneuver in such a confined space.

"Indulge me.... Just one question, Lord.... Lord Goge." They paused and slinked around to face him once again. Father David was staring at Lily. "Is she... what I mean to say is... You say she is an elf.... by elf... do you mean demon?"

"Demon?"

"An Abyssal."

It appeared many of these books had been read. As David stood up from his chair, Goge pressed his lips together and once again repositioned himself opposite the man. He grinned warmly as he placed his hands on the priest's frail shoulders. "We only find ourselves in Akune because we are running from something. Me. You. And her. We all escaped our past and we are looking for a better future. A fresh start."

David smiled. "A fresh start."

\*\*\*\*

The sun was high in the sky. The heavy carriage door slammed shut and Goge exhaled. At the sound of the driver's voice, the horses jolted forward.

Lily leaned back on the leather bench and fidgeted with the two wooden skulls attached to her belt. "Why are you lying to people?"

"Shut up, slave girl! You bring me nothing but bad luck! Everywhere we go I can feel your eyes burning into my back and what is that sound you make when I speak to others? It is like a scoff. Can I not converse with the people of my city without you judging my every word?"

"Well, why don't you tell people the truth?"

Goge clenched his teeth. "That is what I have been doing!"

"You are a liar. I bet you don't even have powers."

"I... you! You saw me summon a shade! Last night! I summoned a shade right in front of you!"

"That didn't look like a shade."

"Very well, if it was not a shade then what was it?"

"Smoke monster."

"Shades are smoke monsters! That is what they are!"

"I bet you are not really Goge."

"Who else would I be?! Who would claim to be me that was not actually me?!"

Lily bit her lip and looked away. A moment passed as she stared out the window. Homes ambled into market stalls and finally turned back to homes. Goge rubbed the back of his neck. "No one is interested in the truth. The truth is as foreign to this world as you and I. They prefer lies. When someone speaks the truth they simply dismiss it as a new type of falsehood."

She peeled her eyes from the window to glare at him. "So you lie?"

"Yes. Cads and scoundrels are notorious liars. As my slave, you may as well know."

They sat quietly for a moment. She returned her attention to the window. "I am not your slave."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I am not."

"Yes. You are."

"I am not."

"You are."

Lily pointed to a small group who stood on the street corner, waiting to cross. "I am a normal person just like everyone else."

"Do not deceive yourself. Whether they have chains on their feet or not, those people out there are slaves. Each and every one."

\*\*\*\*

They arrived at the palace and a locked iron gate. The building was huge. Multiple structures all strung together over a massive lawn. From one end to the next, the estate occupied a district all of its own. Goge disembarked and was instantly assaulted by shouting.

"That's him! That's him!" Two guards lowered their halberds and closed the distance. They did not appear to be the typical Akunian citywatch. Instead, they looked like mercenaries or private security. Both were muscular and wore the standard chainmail that had become so popular in this region. Goge helped Lily down from the carriage before addressing them.

"Move from my path or I shall kill you." He navigated between the startled guards as they attempted to position themselves on either side. The gate itself had been laced with a heavy chain and a shiny new lock. "I could break it, but I do not enjoy the idea of destroying my own property. Are there any suggestions from the audience?"

He looked back to see Lily shake her head. The carriage driver had decided not to get involved and gave a short wave of his hand before departing. The guards had finally circled around to opposite sides with weapons at the ready. Goge placed a hand on the thick iron lock and closed his eyes.

"There is a spell for this. But a great deal of time has passed since I last used it."

"You forgot the spell?"

He opened his eyes and turned to glare at Lily. "You know... You also have powers. Why am I always the one who must perform? I have not witnessed you cast a single spell since our first meeting. When shall you decide to be useful?"

"I have powers?"

Goge went back to focusing on the lock. One of the guards drew closer and aimed the point of a halberd at his midsection.

"Get away from the gate!" the man yelled. Goge stretched out his left hand and cast the spell '*Paralyze*' in a wide arc. He kept his eyes closed and continued to focus on the lock. The sound of the man clattering against the ground let him know the spell had found its target.

Lily groaned. "Too hot here."

"Allow me a moment."

"By the gods, what did you do?! You killed him!" The other guard rushed to the aid of his companion.

The lock shattered with a loud snap. It was only after Goge felt the metal shards sliding through his fingers that he realized what he had done wrong. With a sigh of annoyance, he let the pieces fall from his hand and pulled the chain off the gate. The gate slid open a crack.

The guard knelt by his partner and tried to help him sit up. "You monster! You hideous rotter!"

"He is stunned. In time it shall end." Goge waved Lily onward and they crossed into the palace grounds. It was an exceptionally long walk. Bright red bricks of decent quality pierced the pristine lawn all the way to the entrance, yet there was not even the slightest breeze to relieve them from the sun's oppression. The road ended in a circle at the front entrance with two stairways leading up to an unguarded double door.

An extravagant entry did not fail to impress; tall columns with smooth edges took considerably more space than was necessary in the enormous first room. Even the entryway appeared to be designed for giants rather than humans. Beyond them rose a staircase so wide that ten men could march up the spiral construction without touching shoulders.

It was also amazingly empty. Only scuff marks and trash remained. With such a sprawling estate, it was odd that there would be no staff manning the entrance. Lily could only offer a shrug in response to Goge's glance.

"Looters!" From the ivory staircase came a woman's voice. After a few moments an older woman in a dark red dress began to make her way down. "Looters come, but there is nothing left to take! There is nothing left to steal... Except me."

Goge and Lily moved to separate sides of the stairway to get a good look at her. An unskilled hand had spent the morning applying her makeup. She had long curly brown hair and was wearing a dress that was one size too big. But this did not slow her down as she carefully descended each step and paused on the last.

"I am Goge. The new Lord of Akune. And you are....?"

The woman stepped down and bowed deeply. "My lord... I am Vera Vactransa. Your maidservant."

"What happened here, Vera?"

"Looters, my lord. Hordes of them!" She raised her hands in the air for additional effect. "They came in the night and began stealing everything they could carry. They worked tirelessly until mid-morning. Some of them even removed their shirts and showed their muscled chests. I was appalled!"

"Did the guards try to stop them?" Lily asked.

Goge folded his hands behind his back. "Here it comes..."

Vera seemed on the verge of tears. "The guards actually helped them! When Lord Nath hears of this he will surely be heartbroken."

Goge cleared his throat. "Yes, I am sure. Was anyone injured by this lawless display?"

"Oh yes. Several of the men fell down the stairs while trying to move one of the larger chests. Mister Desmond saw to their bruises."

A well-dressed man entered from the adjoining room and crossed the tiled floor. He was thin and somewhat elderly, with peppered hair and sharp lines around his features. "Good afternoon, sir."

Goge turned to greet him with a nod. "Hello."

"I am Desmond, the head butler. And you are?"

"Lord Goge of Akune."

The man bit his lip. "And... and so you are. Apologies, my lord. I had not expected you."

"Who is currently on staff?"

"That remains to be seen. As of yesterday the palace employed sixty-four maids, butlers, chefs and groundskeepers. However, they have all gone home today. They believe that their employment has become precarious."

"That is a shame, as I plan to pay considerably more than their former employer. Would it be of interest to you?"

"Of course, my lord. If it pleases, I shall begin immediately. I..." Desmond stared at Lily.

Goge gestured. "Ah yes, this is Lily, my slave. As you can see, she has horns. She is a rare breed of horned elf."

"I see. It is a pleasure to meet you." Desmond gave a slight bow.

Vera extended her hand and lightly brushed against one of the horns. Lily jerked her head away and glared.

Goge pointed to the adjoining room. "It is important that we discuss finances, Mister Desmond. Your fee aside, we must get the palace back up and running as quickly as possible."

"Of course, my lord."

\*\*\*\*



アメシ

**FATHER DAVID**

During David's tenure as archpriest, his library had been in a disorganized state. It was once a storage room, but now it housed all the books that would not

fetch a price at the market. These were piled carelessly, showing no signs of order. Even after a decade, the scene remained unchanged.

He had managed to get himself a small desk and chair, but he quickly found himself stacking volumes on those as well. Until today there had been little reason to organize this mess. After climbing over a few piles, he found himself wedged between two overflowing bookcases and began to hunt through the volumes until he found what he needed. The cover was worn and the pages were yellowing: 'A Domain Entity's Guide'. Though its print was small and the illustrations sparse, he scanned its final chapters while sitting on a rather firm stack of documents. It was not long before he found himself whispering.

"Partitioned Abyss, sixth category. Species: Nakiri. Forehead, horns like a ram, porcelain skin. Males have wings and a long thin tail whereas the females are more human in appearance."

David lowered the book. There were no illustrations and the author lamented that he did not know more. A few letters to the academy in Grencia provide more answers, but for right now he would just have to keep digging.

He closed the book and gave his back a long stretch. "What is going on in this city?"

Abyssals were extremely uncommon and usually the result of a botched summoning ritual. Once in a great while, one might hear of such a mishap. Although rare, events such as these would conclude with a creature taking form and visiting untold destruction on those present. Typically nobles, these were foolish souls that were too blinded by hubris to understand the danger.

Historically, allied kingdoms would send special teams of spellcasters to banish such a creature, but David had never been party to such a thing. Such work was for heroes and legends, not an impoverished monk. Never in his life did he think one such creature would stroll into the temple and offer a polite greeting.

David climbed back over the books to the door and stepped out into the darkened corridor. It was a short walk to the kitchen and although there was no food to be found, Sato had arrived with a small basket.

"The beast emerges from his cave." The tall man drew back the lid of his basket to reveal a small collection of fruit inside.

David managed a smile and leaned closer. "You spoil me."

"I recommend the bananas. They were shipped in and will not last long."

"Yes, I suppose you are right."

"How are you doing?"

"Better with some food."

"Take all you want. This is for everyone."

David smiled again and suppressed his guilt for just a moment. Long enough to pluck a banana out of the basket and begin peeling it. "We would be lost without you, Sato."

"I wish I could have grabbed more."

A dull pain began to fill David's head and he did his best to ignore it. "Do... do not speak that way. It is dangerous enough that you take this much. If someone were to see..."

"I heard there were bagels earlier."

"I heard that too."

"Why didn't you come out and have one?"

"There was something that needed to be researched. It was very important." David leaned against the counter as he ate. He was trying not to speak with his mouth full, but hunger had taken over.

"You can't keep doing that. Some might call it virtuous to starve while others feast, but only to a point."

"I was really researching."

"Sure you were..." Sato began unloading some of the fruit into the pantry as he talked. "But sometimes I wonder if you are punishing yourself unjustly."

"Unjustly," David repeated. The pain in his head had grown and was threatening to become debilitating. It was not something he would let bother him. He knew from experience that these headaches would come and go without warning. There was also a chance that they were hunger-related.

"Have you heard about what happened to Lord Nath?"

"No. What happened?"

"I heard it from one of my clerk friends. Lord Nath was assaulted by a vagrant from the dockyard."

"When? Today?"

"Yesterday morning, they let him walk away. Everyone is going crazy and citywatch has no idea what to do."

"They did not seize the man?"

The peace shattered when an acolyte burst into the kitchen and noticed them by the pantry door. It was Joon. "Sato! Go out the back!"

David hid the rest of his banana in a pocket of his robes. "What is it?"

"A lot of citywatch are at the entrance. A carriage as well."

Sato raced to the back rooms while David walked out into the corridor with Joon, leaving the basket on the kitchen counter. He intended to find a room with a window so he could see what was happening, but as soon as he crossed the corridor, a voice echoed from the entrance. "Where is the chief beggar?!"

David parted from Joon with a nervous glance. "Send... send them to the library."

After hurrying back to the library he quickly seized a seat by the window and hauled open a few books to make it appear he had been reading. More distant shouting, followed by a clatter so unexpectedly loud that it nearly caused David to stand back up and investigate.

A voice echoed from down the hall. "Bring him out or bring me to him!"

The approaching footsteps of several armored men resumed after a brief pause. The air was thick with dread, but he resigned himself to playing the part with a deep breath. David recognized a familiar face when the door opened: Hammond, a watchman who usually haunted City Hall as well as the market district. Although not a follower of Mynar, he was sometimes accused of being a nice guy if one met him outside of his patrol. He stood in the doorway and regarded the archpriest as David slowly rose to greet visitors.

Baudin stepped forward and put a hand on Hammond's shoulder. A nobleman, Baudin had a large build with broad shoulders and a thick neck. His face was gaunt with deep scars under his red cheeks. The man was visibly irritated, but still managed an arrogant look in his eye.

David gave a polite bow. His head felt like it was going to explode. "Mister Baudin... I do not... I do not think we have met. What..." After an indeterminate little sound escaped his throat, the archpriest continued. "What can the temple do for you?"

Baudin's eyes narrowed slightly as he stepped closer with clenched hands at his side. "It is about that man you met today."

"Oh?" David returned to his seat, motioning to the chair across from him. As Hammond shut the door, the priest could not help but fold his arms across his stomach. Baudin approached, ignoring the invitation.

"He pretends to be someone from the history books. He murdered Lord Nath and has taken up residence at the palace."

David shut his eyes as he tried to ignore the pain in his head. This was not the time for it. "Mur... Murdered? Why? Why would he do that?"

"Thought you could tell me. What did he say to you?"

David glanced from Baudin to Hammond and back. "He... he claimed to replace Lord Nath as governor. When... when he was here, I mean, that is what he said. He said nothing of murder. I did not even know if this man was telling the..."

Baudin's expression twitched as he towered above the priest. A slow breath followed up the onset of a sneer. "What else did he say?"

"N... not much... really."

Baudin leaned forward with a glare.

"I don't... I don't... I don't know what we talked about. History, the city, Mynar, the temple."

"What did he look like?"

"Short, strange clothes... His face is scarred; he has a big scar across his nose. Old... white hair. Short white hair." He tried to remember. He could envision the man sitting in that chair across from him once again, but this time there was a kind of glow around him as he smiled back. Like a halo. Had that happened? Was David remembering it wrong or had the light from the window caught his features at just the right moment?

Baudin snapped him back before he even realized he was trailing off. "Why does he pretend to be the Mage King? Does he really believe it?"

"I ... do not know. He claims to support the temple."

"Our people say he has a girl with him. She appears to be his property. He tells everyone she is an elf, but she is some sort of monster."

David wanted to crawl under his bed and hide. "I... I don't know. I don't know anything about it. Perhaps I shouldn't talk about it. I don't want to get involved."

Baudin stared into his eyes and balled his right hand into a fist. "David... I do not know what you are trying to hide, but if you don't tell us then I will order my guards to burn this place."

"No! You would not... You do not mean that..."

Baudin lowered his gaze to make himself appear more intimidating, yet his eyes betrayed his frustration. "I will. I'll do it and I'll order my men to kill anyone in the way."

All at once, the ache drained from his head. "I.... I.... I am not sure if I believe you."

"What?"

David's heart was still racing, yet he found his anxiety replaced by something new. It was anger. "You won't burn this temple. You... you won't burn the temple because then one of us would tell Goge what you did. And that scares you. That is why you are here threatening me. You are terrified of him. And you don't know what else to do."

Baudin shifted his stance. David was breathing dangerously fast, but he did not feel lightheaded. His fear had retreated back into the pit of his stomach and so he decided to stand up. With shoulders back, he did his best to return the man's glaring expression.

"David, you had better weigh this carefully. I asked you a question and now you're going to..."

"No. No, I am not."

"Have you gone mad?!"

"Get out!"

Baudin was silent for what felt like an eternity. The look of frustration had turned to surprise. Taking a step back, he turned to the door and pushed past Hammond on his way out. The big man opened his mouth to comment, but decided to follow instead.

With a shaking hand, David stepped forward to close the door. Instead of screaming, he inhaled deeply and tried to steady himself. On any other day he would have berated himself for such a reckless act of defiance. Yet today, he was unable to muster even a moment's worth of regret.

Fear had appeared before him in an entirely unexpected place: in the eyes of Baudin. Fear of words, fear of Goge, and fear of the unknown. It was hard for him to articulate what had happened when he stared into that man's eyes. A terror that David had become so familiar with over the years had somehow infected that noble. How many more would it touch?

The sound of footsteps grew faint. Replaced by silence. David took another deep breath and waited for his heart to slow. He moved to the window to look

outside again. The overcast sky above the empty streets made him think for a moment that no one had visited at all. A faint knock at the door hardly stopped before Joon let himself in.

"They are gone."

"Thank Mynar. It is difficult to believe that just happened."

Joon looked as if he had aged ten years. "I tried to hear through the door. Does this have anything to do with the warehouse food?"

"No, they are after that man from this morning."

"The one with the elf child? Why?"

"I... I think something has changed."

\*\*\*\*

The sun made its final appearance of the day when it poked out from behind the clouds and cast long shadows across the palace courtyard. On short notice, Desmond had done an excellent job of restaffing the palace and it did not take long for a few barrels to be arranged for them to dine upon. Two chefs prepared a delicious meal, but unfortunately, the stew turned out to be poisoned. This was despite the fact that it had been prepared with such great care. Lily was especially disappointed.

They did the best they could with bread and an assortment of fruit before retiring for the evening. Vera found two cotton mattresses to lay upon the floor and even prepared a room for Lily across the hall. It was a pitiful display for the Lord of Akune (and his slave). But no one said this would be easy.

Shortly after nightfall, he fell onto the lumpy mattress and summoned a shade to keep watch. Despite the difficulties of today's activities, tomorrow's looked to be even more strenuous. However, with a good night's sleep, he was sure...

Goge woke to his minion stirring. Shades were incapable of speech; yet, a necromantic connection bound it to him. "Movement": somewhat more of a feeling than a word. If it could be called an emotion, then the sensation might certainly have come across as one of annoyance. Goge opened his eyes and looked into the darkness. He doubted that it could have been midnight quite yet when tapping came from the door.

Goge rolled over and begrudgingly sat up. The tapping came again. As the voice from the hallway was too muffled to hear, he stood and crossed the empty bedroom to the door. Outside a well-dressed man stood with a rather expensive-looking lamp.

"What is it, Desmond?"

"Lord Goge, or whoever you claim to be, it would seem your executioner has arrived."

He rubbed his eyes. "My executioner?"

"Yes, indeed. It would seem the king's men have gathered outside and await your arrival. I assured them they would not be kept waiting."

"Could you not insist they return in the morning?"

Desmond offered the lamp. "Well, the truth is that I believe everyone has grown quite tired of this farce. It is time you are punished for your many crimes. Do you require assistance collecting your things?"

"No, thank you. Please inform them that I am on my way."

He took a step back and tardily closed the bedroom door. Goge rubbed his eyes again. Exhaustion urged a return to his slumber, yet he doubted they had a mind to wait. He required a moment to reequip his gear and stifled a yawn as he passed into the corridors.

The courtyard was exceptionally well lit. A hundred guards lined up against the outer fence, all with lanterns. Goge recognized Commander Teric and Hammond, but a few men without uniforms filtered among the horde as well. Desmond smirked from his position by the door. The smug butler held out his hands as if presenting him.

Lily and Vera stood nearby. Lily appeared tired, but Vera was as fresh as ever. She wore her maid uniform and stuck close to Desmond.

"I liked the Goge fellow. I don't know why everyone is so cross," he heard Vera whisper.

"He is a murderer and a fiend. The king's men keep us safe from people like him." Desmond did not bother to lower his voice.

Goge stepped past them and turned to Lily. "It seems they would not allow either of us to sleep."

She nervously glanced at the citywatch and back to him. "They said I did not have to be your slave anymore. The commander is going to send me to the capital – always wanted to see the capital."

"It is overrated." Goge turned to the citywatch and began to take measured paces to the spot they had gathered. After a few steps, Teric silenced his lieutenants and hurriedly crossed the distance in order to meet him halfway across the lawn.

"I thank you for coming out. We were concerned that the palace would be damaged."

Goge gave a nod. "I think it is I who should be thanking you. I share the same concern."

The commander gestured to the west lawn as another man approached from the far side of the courtyard.

"Who is this?"

Commander Teric scrutinized his expression. "I will let him introduce himself. You and I were unable to speak this morning and I wanted to extend an invitation to surrender before he arrived."

Goge took a moment to stretch his aching back. "Thank you for the offer. It is appreciated."

Teric stared with a nervous intensity. "Please take it seriously. It is outside my power to offer you a trial, but at least it would spare you from what they intend."

"No, thank you." Goge waved him away.

"An attempt was made." Teric turned and signaled his watchmen as he marched back to their lines. The column backed up a bit and secured their crossbows. Goge was sure they would not disobey in a fit of panic, but the commander did not seem keen on taking chances tonight.

The new arrival paused at a distance of four or five wagons. His silver and red cape swayed gently in the breeze. A hood pulled low over the bridge of his nose obscured his face. In his left hand, he held a white staff. A heavy gauntlet nearly twice the size of the hand it covered clung to his right. The mage grinned as he looked upon Goge's disheveled appearance and matted white hair.

"Do I look disappointed?!"

Goge raised an eyebrow. "What?"

His uncovered mouth portrayed a playful smile. "I am Rav Ilmani, Vice Council to the King's Royal College of Magic. Do I look disappointed?!"

"No?"

Rav took a few cautious steps closer. "Well I am! I would have liked to have dueled the real Goge!"

"Why?"

The mage chuckled and held his weapons out to both sides. "Why?! You ask why?! This is all I have ever wanted! All the mage kings! Hyeon, Malcore, Vittren, Chuon, Razzik, Kiyoko, Sycorax. I studied them all my life and do you know what I have learned?"

"Surely, you will tell me."

The mage smiled again, but slowly lowered his arms. "I think... I think I am wasting this speech on you. Who are you really? Some merchant from Tarif islands?"

"Who do you believe I am?"

"I believe you are a farmer." Rav's expression sagged at the revelation. "I suspect you grew tired of paying taxes. I suspect you set out to assassinate the king's subject out of jealousy. You used a 'Lesser Shock' spell on that unarmed man because it is the only spell you know. Overcast the hell out of it too. Like a novice."

"How do you know I am not a blacksmith?"

Laughter erupted. The mage pulled back his hood and planted his staff in the dirt. "Simple. None of the locals are missing a blacksmith. It appears that the absence of a blacksmith is something people would take notice of! Are you ready?!"

"Certainly."

A bright blue flash, and Rav's gauntlet crackled to life as he drew it back. He twisted his arm and ejected a river of lightning at Goge. No sooner had the power poured from him than he thrust his staff into the air and conjured a lesser version of the spell 'Fire Storm'.

Flames sprang from the dirt and seared the very air around them. The sky opened up and hot death fell from the clouds. All along the south side of the palace each window shattered in rapid succession. The lightning intensified as each of the watchmen covered their ears against the sound of thunderous explosions. But the most spectacular destruction came with the first strike of azure fire; it lanced out of the heavens and struck the patch of lawn where Goge was standing, leaving him no time to react.

The grass around them burned too quickly and failed to carry the flames, instead turning the dirt underneath it into smooth glass. A wave of heat rolled

through the courtyard. It was so intense that several onlookers were forced to drop to the ground and crawl away. Vera screamed, but the sound was lost amidst the deafening roar. The citywatch backed against the fence while Desmond and Lily led Vera through the doorway to take shelter. After what seemed to be the end of the world, the assault ended and the watchmen rallied themselves together once more.

Goge stood motionless. Although flames and smoke rose around him, he remained unharmed. The storm clouds had dissipated and the larger fragments of the shattered moon were shining brightly. After several moments, the wind returned to a soft breeze and the necromancer took a single step forward.

Rav peered through the haze of departing smoke. "Impossible. An illusion?" Rav used his staff to dispel all magic within a tight area, but Goge was no illusion. His cane, satchel and half cape faded into view as the spell washed over him and removed the effects that hid them.

"You are unharmed, that is not possible." Rav removed the gauntlet and stretched out a shaking hand to cast Fireball. A sphere of burning energy burst from his palm in a blast of orange and white light, yet it never reached its target. It hit the ground, bounced off the surface and flew into the sky. He cast again and again. He leaned forward and extended his staff, unleashing a torrent of magic that blasted away everything ahead in a thick blue line except for Goge, who remained untouched as the glowing energy washed over him.

Ten female ghosts rose from the ground in a circle around Rav, appearing as ethereal wisps of light. They were armed with spears and dressed in glittering silver ball gowns, apparitions unlike anything Rav had ever witnessed. Their eyes were completely transparent, like pinholes in a sheet of paper.

Rav, in a panic, threw fire and lightning as he was encircled, yet the spells had no effect on these creatures. He drew back and lifted his arms in a desperate attempt to shield himself, but froze at the sight of his adversary.

Goge stood an arm's length away. He lifted his ornate cane and a thin blade of green light sprung from the end like a kama. Rav recognized it instantly. It was not of this world; an infernal weapon. Only now could he see Goge's half cape clearly and the golden circle with two lines sewn into the black cloth.

"You... You really are him." The weapon carved out his throat in a single slash. Onlookers gasped in horror as he collapsed, while the specters held their attacks in anticipation of the necromancer's command.

Goge shoved him with a boot so that he lay face up. "It is unlikely that Sycorax would have been impressed."

Satisfied the man was dead, Goge turned to the bewildered watchmen by the fence. The blade on his weapon retracted and after a tense moment, he motioned toward Teric before setting out to meet him once again. Everyone who held a crossbow made ready, but nobody dared fire. After a short walk, Teric presented himself.

"Spare my men. Kill me, but spare my men. Many of them didn't want to come here tonight. I convinced them. They have families. Let them stack arms and leave. If you want to blame someone, blame me. But let them go."

Goge scanned the crowd a second time. There had been a collection of people without brown cloaks, but where had they gone? "This is not all of you. There were others here a moment ago. Did they flee?"

Teric pressed his lips together and straightened his posture. With a heavy head, Goge choked back a yawn, but was forced to let it out before gesturing to the watchmen. "Double shifts. Double shifts for everyone. You see to it."

He turned his back on them and started back across the grass toward the palace.

"Thank you, my lord." The words came so quietly that it was difficult to know where they had come from. With another gesture from Goge's hand, the ghosts lowered their weapons and shrank back into the dirt.

The door of the palace was closed, but Lily and Vera were peeking out from behind the curtains of a broken window. The door wobbled as he opened it and stepped inside. Fortunately, nothing inside the palace appeared to be damaged. The fact that it did not possess furniture did not immediately register and he found himself standing next to a lantern set atop an upright barrel.

"Ah good, the lantern is undamaged."

Vera leapt from the shadows and wrapped her arms around his neck. "My boy! My handsome boy! I was so scared you would be hurt."

"Control yourself, Vera. Take your hands from me. Where is the slave girl?" He gave a quick look around before spying Lily by the corridor. She began to approach, but found herself halted by Goge's gesture to the stairway. "Bed. Right now. And stay there."

"No. I am going to the capital."

"Madness! You are a demon child from the abyss. How do you know you are not already in the capital? You do not even know what that place is named, you keep referring to it as the capital."

Vera tore herself away and stood in front of him, a smile still painted across her face.

Lily folded her arms defiantly. "I do not need to know the capital's name to know that it is very far from here."

"It shall seem a lot further when I trade you to nomad sailors." He pointed to the stairs again and she eventually complied. Desmond, on the other hand, remained motionless. The lamplight poked at his sulking expression. "Mister Desmond, what troubles you? Are you disappointed?"

The butler shook his head and dropped his gaze to the floor.

"There is a corpse on the lawn. Do not make it your concern. If the city-watch does not carry it with them then I shall order it to relocate itself in the morning." Goge proceeded to the staircase, but paused on the first step. "I will expect a large and rather unpoisoned breakfast when I wake. If this requires you to replace the chef, then so be it."

With a few quick steps, Vera danced to his side. "My love, what of Lady Lily?"

"Miss Vera, what is wrong with you?"

"I do not know what you mean, my love. Is it wrong to show concern for Lady Lily and her travel plans?"

He gave her a long and rather cold stare. "You shall address me as Lord Goge, my lord, or sir. Do not address me as your love. Is this understood?"

"I understand. I shall keep our affections private."

"Make certain to keep them so private that even I am unaware of them." Goge left the lantern for them to enjoy and continued the rest of the way alone.

Back in his bedroom, Goge crossed the empty chamber and inspected the window. Shards of glass littered the floor next to it as black smoke coiled around the edges of the frame and wrapped around the form of a creature.

He pointed to the shade in the most accusing way he could manage. "And where the hell were you? I was outside getting attacked by mages while you were in here relaxing."

Rather than feign embarrassment, it ignored his complaints and moved with slow, uncertain jerks toward the far wall.

"Go guard the door."

Spurred by his command, the creature shot across the room with surprising speed. Goge turned his gaze back to the bedding in the corner. "Now, where were we?" Sleep was slow to claim him. When it did, he dreamt of eggs on toast.

\*\*\*\*

The next day dawned just as gray as the previous. Filtered tendrils of sun, barely visible through the clouds, created a gloomy atmosphere on the palace's upper floor. And yet this mood could not last; as the smell of freshly cooked food began to rise from the kitchen, it permeated every room and corridor. It curled its way into the minds of those that woke up hungry, into the stomachs of those that rose early and into the hearts of those that awoke full of cynicism.

Goge poked his head out into the hallway only to see Lily do the same from the room across. With a rare moment of solidarity they took in the scent of fresh breads and breakfast meats, an experience that was quickly interrupted by a burst of laughter coming from the downstairs banquet hall.

Lily smiled. "Do you think they have bagels?"

"I smell ham."

Although the line was long, the wait was brief. The large dining hall packed servants into two long tables that ran along each side. The aromas wafting through the room tantalized everyone and played across every dish. Several cooks marched up and down the back of the tables, preparing food and swapping trays.

Desmond entered with another tray, but placed it down upon noticing their arrival. "Everyone! Everyone! May I present to you, the master of the house and rightful Lord of Akune, Lord Goge and his slave, the Lady Lily!"

Silence descended on the large room, blotting out the open whispers and chuckling. All eyes had turned, yet Goge did not allow this awkward moment to last. Snatching a plate and pointing to the center table, he offered them all a quick nod and bid Lily to sit. Fake smiles and nods showered them as the room leisurely returned to polite whispers.

Two men in mismatched suits appeared at their side and carefully laid a banquet after they had seated.

Desmond approached. "Oh good, I see the chairs have arrived. Is the food to your liking?"

Lily shot him a grateful nod as she ate and Goge gestured to the windows between bites. "I noticed you had much of the glass fixed. How did you manage on such short notice?"

"The staff was instrumental. It was a challenging task, yet we managed. Uniforms shall take longer, I fear."

Goge swallowed a bite of egg on toast and eyed the hashbrowns with greed. "There is a gentleman in the merchant district who can assist with that. He runs an establishment called Mosasaur Bonin's Clothworks. You may wish to retain his services."

"Yes, my lord. I was aware of Mister Bonin's shop until recently."

"Until recently?"

"As I was informed – two nights ago one of Mister Bonin's customers made a generous gift of several hundred gold tani. It seemed that this was more coin than he had ever seen in his life. Supposedly he closed his shop and set sail the following morning."

Goge's muscles stiffened and his eyes darted back to the table. He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, that is unfortunate."

Desmond took a step closer and came to Lily's side so that he could stand opposite Goge. He lowered his voice. "My lord... About last night... Although I do not deserve it, I beseech you to forgive ... my treason. I was arrogant and ill-mannered."

"It was not treason. One may not betray something they have not sworn to."

"Even so, my lord, I must apologize."

"If you require forgiveness, then you have it."

Lily stood to reach over the table, straining both arms for the hash browns. Desmond quickly assisted her. "I did not expect it to be so freely offered."

Goge shook his head. "A great deal of change shall soon come to this city and it is best if everyone learns to accept it. Where I grew up we had a saying: 'The gods have seen fit to let me live another day and I intend to make that everyone's problem.'"

Desmond gave a slight bow as Lily returned to her seat. "Thank you, my lord. Is there anything else you require this morning?"

"Prepare a bath for me and then get yourself some rest. You must be exhausted after arranging all of this."

"Of course, my lord."

He bowed one last time before drawing the attention of select subordinates and returning to the kitchen.

Goge watched him depart and found himself glancing around at the assortment of palace staff. They were already taking seconds. It seemed as if Desmond had provided a breakfast which was both abundant and delicious.

It was puzzling how the man had recruited so many in half a day. Although the coin had been plentiful, it failed to explain why so many would make themselves available after last night's altercation. On any other day this might warrant investigation – but not today.

\*\*\*\*

Akune's streets sparked alive. People strolled past vendors offering fresh food and household items, while others advertised sales on clothing and linens. The sidewalks were under the control of these vendors. With their scented oils, dried fruits and meats, and wooden tools. They had set up shop on either side of the street and the commoners gave no respect to traffic. Instead, the carriage Goge hired had to slow down at several crossroads to allow passage.

Goge did not mind flaunting his minions to the public, yet sunlight bothered spectral bodies and limited their effectiveness. A collection of Yurei were forced to follow underground. Although passing through solid earth slowed their pursuit, this would ensure they would be at full strength if combat were joined.

His carriage passed an old woman selling flowers from a basket. So fresh and vibrant, when he caught their blossoming scent it threatened to remind him of better days.

Before long, they arrived. The size of the library doubled that of the temple. The entrance displayed a large collection of signs listing the names of its benefactors and each brass plaque appeared to have been recently polished. The carriage slowed to a halt and allowed Goge and Lily to disembark before climbing the steps.

Eventually, they arrived at a massive double door bracketed by decoration, long since bolted from the outside. Another, smaller door had been installed next to it and this now served as the new entrance. Goge pushed against it, but found it locked. He knocked politely. There was no answer. He looked at Lily.

Her questioning stare seemed more of an accusation. "Do you remember the spell?"

Goge gripped his cane and thumped it against the door. "Open up!"

No answer.

"I am Commander Teric of the King's Majesty High Super Guard and official prime lord prince-authority of noble knighthood royalty! Open up in the name of the king!!" He glanced at Lily in the hope that she would applaud his cleverness, yet she did not have a smile to spare.

A loud noise rattled the other side of the door, as if a bolt had been thrown. After a moment, the door opened to reveal a short man with a thin face. A brown cloak and iron badge marked him as a member of the Akunian City-watch.

"Out of my way."

The man's eyes widened and years of practice allowed him to draw his sword with lightning speed. Goge was faster, placing a hand on Lily's shoulder and using the pommel of his cane to cast '*Elemental Wave*'. A bright red flash erupted from the space around him as a shockwave ripped through the doorway and filled the interior building. The watchman was hurled across the reception hall as the spell shook the very walls and passed through to the rooms beyond, overturning tables and knocking portraits to the floor.

"Once again, citywatch spoils the mood." Goge stepped into the library, his cane still smoking from the blast.

Lily scowled and raced to the man's side, reaching down to pull on his arm. He struggled to breathe and remained motionless as she attempted to sit him up. After a brief moment, the guard gasped and coughed. He was not hurt, but it would be a few moments before he could be called recovered. Lily found his sword and took care to drag it to him. He reached for it reflexively, but paused as Goge's gaze washed over him.

"What is...?" A rat-faced man with glasses and a suit rushed into the room. He examined the upset scene, but appeared more concerned by the portraits and furniture than anything else. "What is going on down here?!"

The guard clambered back up and accepted his weapon, sliding it back into its sheath. "An intruder, sir."

"Good morning. I am Lord Goge. I am here to inquire..."

The man interrupted. "We are closed!"

"And now you are open."

"We are a private institution and not open to the public." The man pushed his glasses further up his nose with a finger.

"I am not the public and it would appear your method of operation is at an end. This building is now city property."

The man blinked in surprise. "...but the council."

"You should speak to the council. Ask their advice. Afterward you should dispose of all the contraband you are hiding in the basement."

"You have no..."

"All of it. When you are finished, you may report to City Hall and we can discuss funding. I doubt you will ask to resign, yet that is also an option you may enjoy."

The watchman rubbed the arm upon which he had landed and carefully distanced himself from Lily. For a moment it seemed as if she might be offended by his display of cowardice, but Goge stepped past them on his way to the inner door and as he did, he gestured for her to follow.

Reluctantly, she left both men behind and followed as Goge pulled open the door to the main hall and entered a much larger world. The marble floors and vaulted ceilings of the enormous library gave the space an air of sophistication. Above them, a multitude of ornate chandeliers hung while the delicate plaster walls featured intricate patterns that had been carved with a skilled hand.

Goge could not help but feel his skin crawl at seeing the artifacts on display. There were statues of men, women, animals, mythical creatures, gods, demons, fairies, angels, monsters; none of them were attractive. A hideous display of fantasy to those who were old enough to remember. Various other display cases lay scattered about the room between bookshelves stacked with volumes of varying sizes.

"Wow." Lily stepped up next to him to take it all in.

"I expected more books. Is this a library or a museum?" His eyes were drawn to movement behind one of the bookshelves. "You! Come out!"

A young woman with long blonde hair emerged, though reluctantly. "Me, sir?"

"How many people are hiding behind those shelves?"

"I was not... I was not hiding, sir... my lord." Her voice was soft and respectful, though she offered no gesture of greeting. She brought her hands up slowly as her eyes locked on Lily's horns. "I am the only one here, my lord."

Goge glanced over her appearance. She wore the simple clothes of a peasant doing her best to fit in among the city's elite. "Do you work here?"

"On occasion... my lord. When the library has a need."

"Do you care for the books or clean the floor?"

Lily stomped her foot against hard marble. It did not make much of a sound, but the hall's echo carried it far enough. "Rude! You are so rude!"

He paused to glare back at Lily. "I do not find my question to be unfair."

"It is unfair! Everything you do is unfair! They are just doing their job and you hurt them with magic!"

"They need to be hurt, lest they forget who they are speaking to."

The woman offered a small bow from the waist. "My lord, if it pleases you, I sometimes do both. I tend the books and sometimes I clean."

Goge shot a smirk at Lily, as if to punctuate the woman's words and hold them up as a product of his threatening tone. A small victory, but a victory all the same. Yet she ignored his gloating, so he returned his attention to the peasant. "Locate a book for us. *Verbum noctis domini*. First century."

"*Verbum noctis domini* is a very rare work. All we have are translated copies."

"My request is unchanged."

The woman inhaled deeply and began to sift through the maze of bookshelves. Goge took a moment to examine the stone pillars that supported the great hall's ceiling. One stood out in particular: an older construction wrapped in glyphs, it featured a symbol depicting a circle with a line under it. First Empire symbology, though he wondered if any of these people knew what it meant.

Goge's eyes searched the other designs. "How old is this library?"

The woman's voice came from nearby. "Two years. Although, this section was built last year with materials from the old cathedral!"

He turned so that he could take in the entire structure. "If you were to store a great deal of coin in this library, where might you hide it? At first I suspected the nobles were storing it in fake books, although now I am not so sure."

"Gold? ...there is a vault in the basement. It has some of our most valuable pieces."

"No, it would not be large enough..." Goge paused as a beautiful apparition phased through the far wall and approached. It pointed to the wall it came from. "Ah, it seems the nobles are obvious."

The woman returned with a large green book. "Here it is. Good condition."

Goge accepted the book and pulled out his reading glasses. A brief moment passed as he strode toward the far wall, flipping through the book and studying its pages. A second ghost materialized overhead, but unlike the first, this one held a spectral war hammer above its head, ready to smash something. It joined the first near the far wall and drove its weapon deep through the plaster with a mighty crash.

The woman's face bent in terror after noticing these creatures. She grabbed the locket around her neck and stumbled back a few paces. "Gods protect us."

Goge looked up from the book. "This will do. What is your name?"

"N... Nina."

"Thank you, Nina." He gestured to the sulking girl who had decided to lounge near one of the center tables, practically leaning against it with a display of unforgivable posture. "Are you aware of my slave, Lily?"

"I... I have heard... stories, my lord."

Several more ghosts arrived and organized themselves into groups, one by the gaping hole and another by the adjoining wall. Goge gestured for them to proceed.

The ghost continued to assault the thin plaster with a series of precise attacks. A chunk tore free and shattered against the floor.

"I would like you to teach her how to read."

Nina swallowed hard. "I cannot do that."

He felt his lips pulling into a sneer as his tone betrayed annoyance. "Why?"

"I cannot involve myself."

"Teach Lily to read or I will cut your head off." He turned slightly and looked at her with eyes that advertised just how serious he was.

"How dare you..." she replied, almost a whisper. Goge gestured to the ghosts and the demolition immediately halted. All spectral faces turned to his raised hand as Nina stammered. "How dare you... You storm in here with no manners at all and unleash these creatures, you..."

"Do not preach at me. You were aware of what these criminals were doing and yet you pretended to be ignorant when I asked. Now you have the nerve to lecture me on manners?"

"I confess to avoiding your question, but it was not my intention to take their side."

His voice was no longer gentle or polite; it took on an air of intolerance and disgust. "Whether you were a participant or merely complacent, my lack of manners does not excuse your questionable allegiance."

"It is treason! It is treason! Defying the nobility is punishable by death. If they suspect me of aiding you I would be executed. It is treason!"

Goge raised his cane high above his head and after just a few strides he was standing in front of the woman nearly racked by sobs. "Is that how much you cost?! A few threats of violence?! If that is what it takes to pull your strings then why is my threat insufficient?! Must I prove to you that I am more dangerous than they are?!"

A large table prevented her from backing up further. Nina's fingers gripped the edge as she leaned back slightly. She waited for the strike to come – yet in the brief moment of silence that followed, Lily had darted from her table and placed herself in his path. Goge's eyes drifted down as the girl silently stretched out her arms in protest. Even with her arms out, it was doubtful that she could cover enough space to block the strike, but she appeared determined to try.

"You stop it! You stop it right now!" Lily raised her voice in an attempt to sound intimidating.

"Just as well, you also require a good beating." The cane twisted in his hand and he used the tip of it to gently stab Lily's shoulder. The girl made an annoyed sound and briefly brought down a hand to swat it away. He continued poking, now on her other shoulder. He alternated from shoulder to shoulder, taking advantage of her small stature and limited reach.

She tried to latch onto the cane in a surprise attack. "I said stop it!"

"Insubordinate slave! I should not have fed you!"

"Five pieces of gold." Nina's voice drew both pairs of eyes and a pause in their dispute. "If you want me to risk my life to do this, then I need five royal tani. Up front. Right now."

Lily released the end of the cane as Goge corrected his posture. It was as if they were only now remembering that Nina was present. He smoothed out his long coat and then returned to the spirits standing by the hole in the wall.

They restarted their efforts to make it wider, and as he got closer, the Yurei paused so that he could reach inside. When he returned, he set ten gold coins on the table, recollected his book and held it up so that both young ladies could see the words *Verbum noctis domini* written on the cover.

"I shall pay ten, but you would do well to remember that this is the law now. If anyone accuses you of treason, you should direct them to it." He turned to the door. Several of the Yurei ended their assault on the wall and reached inside. They came away with a number of wooden chests, each secured with a leather strap. They lined up next to their master and waited for his next command.

Goge continued on without so much as a backward glance. "Study hard, slave girl! I shall return shortly!"

\*\*\*\*

In contrast to carriages, wagons were much easier to find. City Hall was not very far away, but Goge found himself with a great deal of cargo to move and a carriage would not have been sufficient. A skeleton, reins in hand, drove the wagon onward while he reclined on the bench next to it. Stacked three high and laid across the backs of each of the three wagons of the convoy, each wooden chest was so snug they made no noise while bouncing along the brick streets.

Upon slowing to a stop, Goge hopped down off the bench and took notice of a clerk marking his arrival. Four guards stood by the entrance as well, but they did not react. For a moment he wondered if they were carrying out their second shift or if Teric had defied him. He thought to ask, but this would have required him to decide on whether or not he truly cared.

"My lord?" The clerk gave a quick bow. She was a short woman with dark brown hair and small black eyes. Her dress was long and her blouse was pressed. A very professional appearance.

"I have much to do. What is your business?"

The woman held up a thin ledger in an attempt to attract his attention. "It is about this account, my lord. There is no money in the treasury."

David emerged from the entrance. He gave the guards a nod and slowly ambled down the steps. His hands folded in front of his long robes. The archpriest looked at the first wagon with interest and glanced at the second as it slowed behind the first.

Goge stepped around the clerk and waved. "Father David! So good to see you!"

"I was... was just talking to your Clerk."

"My lord?" The woman tried to interrupt as he strolled to the rear of the vehicle. "My lord, that is what I am trying to tell you. Representatives of the Mynar Temple claim they have a credit with the city..."

"They do. But why are they talking to you?"

"I run the accounts for the City of Akune. My name is Beatrice. I am your clerk. I am the only clerk left."

"So they resigned?"

"Yes, my lord, this morning."

Goge struggled to pull the first chest off the wagon. "Welcome to the accounts department, Miss Beatrice."

David stepped forward. "That looks... do you... n... need help?"

"No, I shall manage," he replied, but David helped anyway. He grabbed the rope harness on one side and strained with all his might. The two men gave a sigh of relief as it gently settled against the ground.

Beatrice hugged the ledger to her chest and took another step forward. "My lord! My lord, ignore me if you wish, but this is serious. The city is bankrupt. There is no money in the safe."

Goge remained hunched over as he untied the latch on the chest. "Father David, how much do you wish to withdraw this morning?"

"I was hoping for two hundred so that we can send for materials." David stood up straight and stretched his back a moment.

Goge flipped open the lid of the chest. Neatly stacked gold coins packed the container solid. "Did you bring a bag?"

"I... I did not."

Goge looked to Beatrice.

"I will get one." Beatrice gave a flustered expression and turned to walk back toward the entrance. Before she had taken a single step she startled at the sight of the wagon driver, not noticing until now.

David opened his hand. "Why are you using skeletons to drive gold around the city?"

"Everyone wishes to aid us. They are climbing from their graves to lend a hand."

"You are not funny, Lord Goge. The dead should be allowed to rest." The priest's voice was softer now. In the short time since he had met the man, there appeared to be a change in him. Anyone might feign friendliness when you filled their pockets with gold, but this was something more.

"...and one day they shall." Goge waved to the guards by the entrance, but found them reluctant to approach.

David shook his head and glanced at the skeleton still seated on the bench. "Why do your minions not help?"

"Those are fast. But not strong. The horses do not enjoy their presence, so they are best left to the task they are suited for. Go with Beatrice and fetch your bag... if my employment of the dead bothers you, then I do not wish you to see what I do next."

"W... what are you going to do?"

Goge put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Since the citywatch is too timid to assist us, I will wait until you are thoroughly distracted with other matters and then I will have these crates moved."

\*\*\*\*

The aging corridors, dark and uneven, desperately required the attention of a mason. It reminded David of the temple halls and he wondered if they were both built around the same time.

Beatrice had retreated to her office and was sitting at a rather shiny desk of well-polished wood. The room was brightly lit and bare except for a few books. She scribbled furiously into a ledger, but paused when he approached.

A strip was neatly cut. "This is not a proper receipt, but it will have to suffice until we get more help. Nine thousand, eight hundred is the remainder. Please keep this for your records."

She delivered it to his hand and retrieved a folded leather bag from the desk.

"Thank you, miss." He gave a bow and turned to leave, but hesitated as she stood up. She eyed him nervously and bit her bottom lip. "What is it?"

"Um... well... Since you work for... What do you want me to call you?"

"Father David. And, I don't really work for the city, it is Father David. I am the head of the temple."

"Okay. So..."

"Why... I hope I am not being too personal... but... why did you stay? When... when all the other clerks left."

Beatrice sighed and sank back to her chair. She rested her elbows on either side of the desk, her expression distant as she stared at something far away. "Because someone has to. Someone must hold this place together in case anyone ever comes back to this hellhole. It is..."

David felt his posture begin to straighten. Even as it did, the muscles in his neck and shoulders began to relax. "I understand. I understand completely."

The sound of approaching footsteps cut this feeling short. The shadow of a tall figure fell over them as a pair of blue eyes peered down under thick brows.

"Is this City Hall? Where is everyone? Is no one charged with running this city?" His voice was refined, but bent on intimidation. He was dressed in stitched leather and wore a wide brimmed hat, which had been folded on both sides. The hat was pulled low enough that his eyes were half-hidden. The chain mail shirt that hung beneath his cloak had several metal plates sewn into it and a large sword was strapped to his hip.

David began to point at the front entrance. "I... I think..."

Beatrice gave a small sigh and painted a fake smile on her lips before glancing up. "I am. What can I do for you?"

The man leaned forward and slapped a shipping manifest on her desk. It was a thick book with the pages curled at the end, the kind that ship captains often used on multi- port ventures.

"Dockmaster won't let me unload my cargo. 'Said it would take a few days. This is complete garbage! What the hell is going on here?'"

"Did you pay the tax?" Beatrice picked up the book and began turning the pages. She searched for the tax stamp, but could not find it.

"Of course not! That's the problem! He won't accept it!"

"I think the man you want to see is outside." David gestured to the front door. Beatrice stood up.

"Father David is correct. Let us go see him." She returned the manifest and led the way.

\*\*\*\*

Nina sat across from Lily. The child drew letters and Nina drew small animal doodles beside them. The animals helped Lily associate the letters with words, and copying those letters made it easier for her to recognize them. It was not difficult to educate a girl like her. If anything, she was more eager to learn than most other children.

This was not something that had ever received much thought, but Nina enjoyed teaching. She got to share in the joy and challenge of every tiny lesson. A momentary celebration followed each revelation. In some way, she assumed that this was how parenting must feel.

Nina pretended not to notice her horns. It would have been rude to do otherwise and, behind the unusual circumstance they had both found themselves in, Lily was just a little girl.

"Let's try another letter." Lily's quill ended another symbol and Nina scribbled a new drawing beside it. It was a snake, although she could not prevent herself from exaggerating the eyes.

"That is a rather silly snake, isn't it?" Nina mused, almost to herself.

Lily examined it. "Yes, but not a snake, it is a serpent."

"Do they have serpents where you come from?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know where you are from?" It wasn't uncommon. There were thousands of slaves that came through Akune every month: some were the products of war, some were the products of debt. Most were separated from their parents at a very early age.

"No. The dog lady brought me here."

"Dog lady?"

Lily flipped the page on the workbook and set about making a childish drawing of a woman holding a bundle. She finished by giving the woman a tail and triangle ears.

"She looks very interesting."

The girl took a moment to shade in the hair and twisted the quill around to draw two tiny eyes at the top of the bundle, as if someone were peeking out. "I remember she smelled nice. And she could run very, very fast."

"Did she bark like a dog?"

Lily's mouth puckered into a secret smile. "No, silly."

"Well, she still looks interesting."

"What about your parents?"

Nina opened the locket around her neck to reveal two tiny portraits. They had not been drawn by a skilled hand, yet from a distance it was relatively convincing. "Gregor and Tia. They died when I was very young. The coughing sickness."

"They look happy." The girl stared at the smiling portraits. Nina gave them a glance as well before closing the locket.

"Things were very different back then."

"Nina! You whore!" A deep voice boomed across the library, followed by a door slam. Nina nearly jumped out of her chair. From the other side of the great hall she could see a finely-dressed man stalking toward them. It only took a moment to position herself between Lily and Baron Eckard as he pointed to the massive hole in the far wall. "Where is it?! Where is my gold?! Damn you, Nina! What did you do?!"

Nina backed up against Lily's chair and brought back her arms to wall in the child. "I didn't..."

"How did he know?! Did you tell him where it was?! Damn you! Damn you, Nina!"

To her right, a stack of books toppled from one of the many bookcases, seemingly on its own. Nina sensed motion and only had a moment to realize what was about to happen.

She put up both hands in warning. "Don't! Don't come any closer!"

"Damn you! You stupid whore!" A murderous rage animated Eckard's succession of quick steps with fists clenched on either side. Yet as he stepped within grabbing range, a blur of white light darted from between the bookcases. Eckard grunted and flailed his arms in surprise as he hit the floor. Even as his back slid across the floor, the advancing apparition pointed a spectral falchion at the man's face.

The Baron gasped, tried to scream and only drew in a panicked breath. Eckard scrambled his legs as if he were trying to stand, but the Yurei promptly stepped on his chest and pushed the blade up to his cheek.

Nina's blood was pumping buckets as she lowered her hands and tried to steady herself. It was not her wish to witness a murder, but for some reason she could not pull her eyes away from what was about to happen. The ghost waited for a long time, staring down at the man as its spectral clothing fluttered in a breeze that did not exist.

Eckard starred up into the apparition's lifeless expression and finally managed to pull a full breath into his lungs. "No! No! By all that is holy!"

"Be silent!" Nina barked. "If you wish to live, don't fight! Surely, it was guarding Goge's child and you've made it angry!"

Eckard pressed his lips together and turned his eyes to Nina. His expression begged for help. Lily put down her quill and began to stand up, but Nina placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and eased her back into the chair.

Nina advanced, her movements as delicate as a shadow. The specter gave no reaction. Another step and then another. The Baron, flanked on both sides by a table and chairs, began to slide his left hand toward one of the chair legs sitting slightly out of reach.

"Don't. Don't move. Eckard, you fool, do not give it a reason."

Nina gently reached up onto the bookshelf where she had placed her belongings and dug into her bag. Slowly, she produced a long, sharp letter opener. She took one last step until she was standing next to the Yurei. The ghost completely ignored her approach. Nina grasped the letter opener like a dagger and held it at the ready. She did not know whether or not the tiny blade could hurt such a creature, but she also did not want to be empty-handed if it decided to attack her instead. Her gaze drifted to Baron Eckard. Yet, as she saw him cowering on the marble tile, she felt something new. Solidarity – not with him, but with the creature. She hated Eckard.

This was the man who had uplifted most of the nobles in Akune. Lord Nath's right hand. Lords came and went, but it seemed that Baron Eckard had always been here. It was his money that had spared her from slavery, yet it had been his hirelings who had also brought her to market. Every year he charged Hammond an outrageous interest on that loan and every year they drew closer to the edge.

"Hammond is a good man." She found herself whispering, the point of her blade turned toward him. "He did every unspeakable thing you asked of him. He did it for me. Every year. I don't...."

Eckard shifted his gaze from Nina to her blade.

"I can't be the woman he deserves. But I owe him everything."

Nina inched another step forward. And then another. She knelt down beside the point of the spectral blade and placed her free hand against Eckard's wrist.

"You use that debt to..."

"I will release the debt."

Nina's lips parted. Shock set in as his words rang in her ear. It had come so easy. No resistance. No hesitation. Whether he was lying or telling the truth—she found herself wondering whether or not it mattered. With just a simple push of her blade, Hammond would be rid of him. No, not just Hammond: the entire city would no doubt breathe a sigh of relief. She would get away with it too. Such a grisly act would surely be blamed on Goge or his ghostly assassin. One menace slays another and who would suspect it was actually her who brought this evil to an end? No one would know. No one but...

She looked back to the table where Lily sat and found the girl's unblinking eyes locked on her expression. Nina realized she had been holding her breath. She forced herself to draw air back into her lungs and stood back up. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a single gold tani, one of the coins Goge had given her. Without any style or grace, she tossed it to the floor.

"No. Take this. That is your payment. Now Hammond owes you nothing. Neither of us owe you. You can keep whatever the remainder is. I don't care. But we will never see you again."

Nina reached out for Lily's hand and waited for the girl to gather up the writing supplies before carefully stepping around the ghost.

"By my side – let us continue your lesson in the director's office. I suspect the ghost will follow when we depart."

It was a short walk to the hall's entrance. Nina had to pause and help the girl carry some of the supplies, but as she glanced back she noticed the apparition disengage from Eckard and dutifully turn to follow.

Lily leaned close and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Who was that man?"

\*\*\*\*

The Yurei were left behind to unload his wagons.

The basement was his top pick for storing gold, but Goge wasn't prepared to let Beatrice catalog it just yet. Assuming he was successful in preventing the nobles from reclaiming it, the treasury would be enormous.

Goge sat across from Captain Ren Valmort, staring in awe at the man's carriage. It was a work of art in terms of craftsmanship and design, with polished wood that glistened in the sunlight. The cabin was in pristine condition despite being a decade old, with finely woven curtains and hand-carved surfaces as smooth as glass. The wheels were not made of iron, but of an alloy that could dampen the vibrations of the road. The horses appeared to be strong enough to carry an army through battle, but they were much smaller than any horse Goge had seen in this realm.

This is how it was supposed to feel to ride in style. It was not uncommon for a wealthy merchant to have friends in every port (friends who could lend you a carriage on short notice), but for a carriage like this, it was clear that this man had very important associates.

Ren was staring at him. "You are acting as if you have never ridden in the back before."

"No, no, I have. Yet, I was not aware that there were carriages of such quality here in Akune. It might amaze you to see what passes for transportation in this city. Your vehicle gives me hope, as I had nearly resigned myself to walking."

"What do you mean? There aren't many ports in this kingdom without at least three different forms of conveyance. Carriage, wagon, and even those little carts used by farmers."

"Well, it does not help that most of the hirelings seem to hide from me."

"To be fair..." Ren looked down at his hands as he used his fingers to carefully crease the edges of his hat. "To be fair... I was quite worried about approaching you as well. Nearly all my associates warned me against it."

Goge raised an eyebrow. "Nearly all? Did one wish you harm?"

Ren smiled and looked up. "Forgive my manner of speech. When I said nearly all, I was attempting not to say absolutely all of them."

"And yet you bravely ignored their advice."

"Not exactly..."

“There is that manner of speech again. Say what you mean.” Goge used a finger to pull back the curtains on the left window. Although they had not arrived at the dockyard, he quickly recognized the many warehouses and service buildings that surrounded it. They blurred by faster than he expected. It was impressive how fast the carriage was moving without disturbing either of its passengers.

“I intended to find someone at the city building and get a stamp on my book. Shouldn’t matter if it comes from the dockman or the number counters. It is the same stamp. They will have to accept it. Really, I did not think I would run into anyone else.”

He returned his attention to the captain, locking eyes for just a moment. “Did you mean to say you were hoping you would not run into me?”

“My lord... I saw ghosts today. Every wind a sailor ever drew on has blown me around this world several times over. But I have never seen anything like the creatures that are crawling around Akune. How can I not fear for my safety?”

Goge waved the man’s words away. “Relax your mind, Ren. It is understandable that people are excited by recent events, yet it shall all become commonplace tomorrow.”

“I do not see how...”

“Did you know there are ghosts beneath this city? Thousands of them. They have been down there since long before I was born. Long before the empire. I suspect they will be there long after we are gone. Although people might be alarmed by something they have never seen before, one should not assume that no one ever has. My return has not added interest to this world. It was simply unexpected, much like the ghosts you saw.”

Ren sat up straight and quit playing with his hat. “Well... I would certainly agree that the last few days were unexpected. Typically, my ship is in and out of Akune in just a few hours. Do not mistake me, this is a fine city you have, but here I am two days later, behind schedule.”

“A fine city. A fine city, you say.”

“Well... It is not Kayang, but as far as port cities are concerned, it seems well enough.”

Goge pulled back the curtain completely and extended his arm out the window. “Look there, beyond the district, poking out from over the rooftops. The city walls. Do you see them?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Look at it and you will see all the stones that were quarried from the greatest civilization this pathetic world has ever known. It is fine that you compliment it, yet I suspect you do so because you did not receive the privilege of knowing what came before. If Toth is a kingdom worthy of praise, then you should know that ten centuries past – the oceans were half their size and every city in this world was a jewel to be cherished. Now look. Look what these idiots have done. Pulled it all down and turned it into a primitive pile. Had the people of this world taken care of what we left behind, you would not be forced to live this way. This may as well be a collection of slave tents, dressed in the bones of greatness!”

He had to peel his eyes away from the mismatched stones in the distance. At least the library had been put up with some level of care, yet that distant wall was inexcusable. A disgusting display of apathy. Not only for what those stones were once a part, but for the lack of effort invested in what became of it. And what purpose could it serve? Surely not to keep anyone out. It would not take a mage to topple something so poorly crafted. A few dozen peasants and a bit of rope would do the job just fine.

He glanced back to Ren for approval, but found the man frozen with large, unblinking eyes. It was something Goge was not expecting: a certain kind of fear that takes hold when you start to think someone has confined you with a potentially dangerous animal. What had he said? Had he been shouting? He closed the curtain and rested his back against the bench. “Sir, I am upset, forgive my weakness. This... this was not what I meant to say.”

Ren took a slow breath. “It would seem I am not the only one who has had a difficult week.”

“It started off well enough.”

“May I ask what happened?”

Goge gazed at the floor for a brief moment. “The past came back to haunt me, I suspect. Came back to haunt us all. Now it seems I have returned to haunt Akune. If this week had a theme, that would surely be it.”

“You ducked under my question. Why keep secrets unless it was something you did not want to get around? I’ve been sailing all my life, captaining for half that – I can tell when a man is running from a woman.” Ren forced a smile, but

nearly bit the edge of his lip as he did. His comment was just a little too familiar. If an uncomfortable silence followed, it might sink him.

Goge broke a smile and shook his head. "No, it does not involve a woman. Wish it were so, but I fear I am a bit too old for such games. No, no, it involves matters that I would not expect you to understand and with which I do not wish to bore you. As a captain, you have other interests."

"Correct, I have ninety-five sailors getting in each other's hair for two days and driving me crazy. We have both had a lousy week. Hell, this whole month is something I would like to bury at the bottom of a mug. I can understand that I do not know the problems you face, but since it is my request that brought you here, might I ask that you avoid violence?"

A line of run-down buildings came to an end just outside the window and revealed a very crowded dockyard. Ranging from galleons to schooners, they had all been anchored in tight rows and it was clear that no one was attempting to service them.

"I do not intend to wear a paper crown. My authority is absolute and they will be made to understand that. Which ship is yours?"

Ren pointed to a massive ship on the center row. "That's the Blue Wind."

"Is it ready to unload?"

"Since yesterday, my lord."

"Deliver me to the harbormaster... or dockmaster. Whatever he calls himself. You will have to point him out."

The carriage sped past a long line of empty wagons before coming to a stop next to a small shed anchored before the boardwalk. A huddle of dock workers lingered in the distance, suspicious of such a fine carriage. Goge stepped off and motioned for them to approach, but none obeyed. After a moment, a short bald man emerged from the shack's dimly lit interior and adopted an angry expression.

He spit on the ground before shouting at Ren. "Who is that?! Who did you bring here?!"

Goge casually transferred his cane to his left hand and stepped between the two men. With a fake smile, he delivered a short nod of greeting. "Hello, I am looking for the harbormaster."

"Ren, how dare you go and get him! I'm the one who runs this harbor!"

"If you won't unload my ship then -!" Ren stopped after Goge lifted a hand.

"What is your name?"

The bald man made a show of inspecting him, glancing at his expensive boots and running his eyes up every layer of clothing before sneering in disgust. Goge's appearance was certainly a contrast to the man's simple pants, shirt and leather vest, but it was apparent he intended it to be more of an insult than anything else.

"Bonti. I run this port for the Dockworkers Union and I say who steps foot on it. You can get back in that wagon and get your dolly ass out of here."

Goge kept his smile. "Would you like to continue as harbormaster?"

"I am not afraid of you and I don't need your permission! The Dockworkers Union was commissioned by..."

"Lord Nath is dead. Would you like to continue working for the city?"

Bonti squinted and dropped his voice to a whisper. "By the gods, I'll kill you if you don't leave."

"Then you are dismissed, Bonti."

Once more, the bald man spit on the ground. He muttered something under his breath before turning and stalking back to the shed. A quick wave to the idle dockworkers and a gesture to Goge was all it took. Ten, fifteen, perhaps thirty dockworkers began to approach. Despite the fact that none of them had weapons, they appeared to be intent on violence. More stood up from crouched positions on the left and right.

Ren took a step away, no longer pleased by his involvement. "I believe you have kicked the hornet's nest. If we retreat to my ship..."

Goge straightened his coat and vest for just a moment. "Remain here, Captain Ren. We are nearly finished."

Before long, the mob of men had surrounded them, waving their fists and shouting threats. None dared touch him, but the voices of the swelling crowd were rising to a furious roar. No one paid attention to Ren; instead, they leveled their protests at Goge, insulting his legitimacy, morality and authority. Screaming challenges, insults and threats. A barrel opener in the form of an obscenely large iron tool was produced by one of the larger men. He raised it like a mace as he shoved through the crowd. When he was within striking distance, he coiled it back for a blow.

Goge reached into his coat pocket. He retrieved a single gold tani, held it up for all to see and shouted over the crowd: "How would you all like to earn ten times the amount you are making right now?"

Everyone went silent. Fifty, maybe sixty men froze in place, with some holding their breath in anticipation of whichever words would follow. Goge stretched his arm as high as it would go and pinched the coin between two fingers to make sure they could all see it flash against the midmorning sky.

"I am not joking! This is no game! Every single one of you! Ten times the amount you earn right now!" He paused to scan the crowd, expressing nothing, his eyes lingering on their ratty appearance and dusty faces. Even Bonti, who had previously stormed off, still hovered near the shed. The crowd wavered as Goge stepped forward.

"You are absolutely right. All of you. You are all correct. I am not Lord Nath. I am not a nobleman. I am not even associated with your Union." Goge lowered his hand, turning in place as he spoke. "But as I understand it... your Union takes half, or sometimes three-quarters of your earnings. My good people, I am not here to take your coin. I am here to pay you. And I pay ten times what you earn right now."

More men approached, no doubt curious about the spectacle. Goge waited for them to arrive before continuing.

"This no revolution. It is not a rebellion against injustice. You do not have the power to choose who rules you. What you have is a choice of who pays you. You can continue under the Union's leadership and hope that they one day find something to offer. Or you can choose to make more coin in one day than you made all of last month. Lord Nath is dead, the Union is without a patron, your leaders are in chaos and you will no doubt return home with an empty stomach this day. Or, you can spend your time working for the city and earn more coin than you have ever seen in your lives."

He studied their expressions, waiting for the moment when disbelief began to creep onto the lines around their upper lips and wrinkle their noses. When it finally began to appear, he raised his voice again.

"Ten copper pennies, per ship... per person. It does not matter how many of you work the same ship. It does not matter if you get the whole damn city to chain load these ships one at a time. It does not matter if you run shifts night

and day: I will pay you all and the faster you unload them, the faster your pockets will be filled."

There it was. No longer able to contest his words with their own suspicious minds, their gazes slowly trailed toward a leader. A protector. A trusted authority. It was one of the taller men in the middle. An older man with no shirt and thick hands. Goge took a few steps toward him, encouraged by the fact that he would not look away. Noticing that everyone was waiting for a reaction, the man unfolded his arms and put those thick hands on his hips.

Goge moved close enough to whisper. In such a silence, the words would carry far. "What is your name?"

"My name? I'm Peari."

"Hello, Peari. I am Lord Goge. As of today there will be no import taxes in Akune. No trade tax, no fees, no duties. Anyone who wishes to sell goods in Akune can do so without charge or permission. What do you think is going to happen to these docks?"

Peari glanced to the sea and back. "Everyone'll come here. We'll be backed up for months. They'll go mad trying to get in."

Goge presented the gold coin to Peari. The man seemed intent on hesitating, but quickly failed. Those thick fingers caressed the edges of the coin as if to convince himself it was real.

"You are the new harbormaster. Your fee is twelve gold tani per month, coins on the barrel. Everyone is paid 'coins on the barrel' just so long as they put in the work. Hire two underbosses for half that. Then hire as many dock workers as you can find. Only speed matters to me, not numbers, not coins. Every wage invoice you write will be paid out at City Hall, without question. But please write clearly so my clerk can read it. If you do not have a quill, buy one. If you never learned to write, hire someone to write for you. If you want to buy equipment, write an invoice and do so. If you have any questions, ask me. If you have a dispute with another dock worker, file it with City Hall. If you discover contraband, inform citywatch. These ships must be unloaded. Are we agreed?"

Peari stuffed the coin under his belt. The top of his pants concealed a small spice bag, which had been tied to the threads of the fabric and had been empty until now. "Never mind us, my lord, I need to find a quill and we have ships to unload."

"Excellent. I must return to my slaughter of the previous administration. Please excuse me as well." The crowd parted as Goge winded his way back where he had come, yet they did not disperse. A thin murmur began to rise as he passed beyond earshot to find Captain Ren, standing alone with hat in hand.

Bonti swung in from the side and bowed low before either of them could speak. "Sir! My lord! My lord, I must make amends. I spoke in haste."

Ren shook his head with a smile. "Lord Goge, It seems you are quite mad. How can you afford all of this?"

"Sell me your carriage and I will tell you."

They both erupted into laughter. It was a genuine laugh, the kind of laugh that came from two men that had nothing in common except a mutual distrust. "Not a chance."

Bonti bowed again before dancing around like a begging child. "My lord! Is there a position for me with the city?"

Goge rolled his eyes. "Bonti, I will hire you for the same price as Peari. I want you to go to City Hall and find a woman named Beatrice. She is your master. Your job will be to audit Peari and the dockyard invoices. Keep Peari honest and make sure he does not become ambitious."

"Thank you, my lord! Thank you!" Bonti dropped to his knees and began to kiss the hem of Goge's coat.

"Have a care, Bonti. Do not allow me to discover a conspiracy between you and Peari. Jobbery is no longer an Akunian tradition. From this day forward, it is treason."

Goge glanced at Ren and noticed his interest in something in the distance. Peari was breaking up the crowd into teams and pointing at individual ships. Ren turned his hat and seated it on his head. "It seems I must prepare my crew for visitors. My carriage will take you anywhere you wish for the rest of the day. Then, I fear, it must be returned."

He gave a nod. "I appreciate this, Captain. Before dark, I shall return and make sure things are progressing smoothly."

With a final glance back at the docks, he allowed himself a moment to inspect the many ships in port. Although they looked extremely different from the types he had seen in ages past, he still admired the squat designs this world seemed to be famous for. Whether human or elven, each was built for stability, like tiny homes at sea. It was as if each had been designed for a tempest they

knew to be inevitable. Finally, he tore himself away and climbed into the back of his loaned carriage. The day had only just begun.

\*\*\*\*

Baudin arrived at the Eckard mansion outside of town. It was a sight to behold how well the grounds had been maintained over the years. The manor was large and impressive, but it did not compare to the enormous homes he saw in Odenkirk. Even though smaller estates were to be expected outside the capital, this plot seemed to waste a great deal of land due to its isolation and large size. Massive blocks of granite had been mortared together and painted white, creating a stark contrast with the lush greenery behind the tall stone walls.

He dismounted his horse and walked the last thirty or forty paces. A large carriage stood in the courtyard. Gilded trunks of the large sort had been tied to the back. There were no servants to receive him or tend his horse, so he proceeded to the front door and knocked. After a moment he knocked again. Finally, he called out to see if someone inside could hear him.

Just as Baudin began to feel pangs of concern in his gut, the door snapped open to reveal Baron Eckard. He was dressed in a long red coat with an ornate golden chain at the waist. He carried a large chest, half full, that flopped open and closed as he walked past without so much as a greeting.

"My lord?"

The Baron paused, but did not turn around. After several seconds he set the trunk down, closed the carriage doors and turned back toward the front door.

"What do you want?"

"Where are you going, my lord?"

Eckard snapped his fingers as if remembering something and made a brisk approach toward the entrance. "I am leaving. There is no reason to stay here. You should as well."

"My lord, you are just going to give up? That is not like you at all. You can't let this upstart walk in and destroy everything we built."

Eckard stopped in front of Baudin and turned to stare. The man's gaze pierced him like an arrow. "Do you think that is what I am doing?"

"I... this is different."

"Different how? Is there some other way to handle it? Because I need not remind you that Nath and Rav are dead!"

"If you leave Akune, everyone will think you are running away."

"How would you suggest we fight him?!"

"We could hire mercenaries."

"Goge...." Eckard paused, put a hand against his forehead and glanced at the ground. His expression changed from one of fury to one of despair. "Goge found it. I don't know how. Some time today. He stole it. All of it. All those years wasted. Forty thousand tani gone... gone."

"All of it?"

"Every single coin. His creatures carted it all away before I could even..."

"We can get it back."

"Are you mad? You saw what he did to Rav! Now he has creatures walking around the city openly killing anyone that defies him!"

Baudin took a deep breath. "Then we kill Goge."

"That is madness. Without the king's men, death would be certain. We are not the Council of Redd. We are not heroes from the pages of history. It would take an army and we do not have the coin for a single sword."

"Not necessarily."

"Do not play games with me, Baudin."

"Have you forgotten Stella and Vassago? We can pool our resources. Talk to the Guild and the Islanders. They want this just as much as we do."

"Well, then good luck to you! I hope your plan works!" Eckard stalked back into the house and retrieved his hat. A few seconds later he returned and strode to the carriage. "I am going to the capital to meet with the King. It may look like I am running away like a coward, but frankly I do not care. Stay low and avoid stupid ideas until I return with aid. He will kill you, Baudin. That man is as much a monster as the creatures that follow him around."

Eckard climbed up into the driver's seat and snapped the reins. The coach accelerated and Baudin watched his sponsor disappear in a cloud of dust. The sound of shoed horses faded into the distance as he turned back to regard his own mount. The ride back into the city seemed somehow longer.

The Count of Culross instructed his driver to take the most leisurely path possible; he was in no hurry. His carriage rivaled the size of a small apartment and stretched twice as long as those of lesser nobles, eschewing any benches or handrails. Instead, this roomy cabin equipped three couches, a fur rug, several chests, a vice cabinet complete with wine glasses and a vanity mirror. Not the apex of luxury by far, yet it was the best one could do on this side of the kingdom.

"No, no, no... This does not please me." Vassago glanced down at the woman who was paying special attention to his lap.

She was young, attractive and half-dressed. Golden hair, slim eyebrows and small features: all of the things that should have excited him. She looked up with a concerned expression, her eyeballs already glistening with tears.

It was not her fault, Vassago thought; on any other day she might have found this task to be quite easy. Today, it seemed, he had a lot on his mind.

"We can try another way, my lord."

"That will not please me either. Simply... just stop. Just stop touching me for a moment." He used his hands in an attempt to push her away, but she resisted.

Latching onto his belt, she used her shoulders to shrug off the effort. "Let me try again, lord! Let me try again!"

Finally, he managed to unbalance her small form and gave her a hard shove. "Stupid, stupid whore! I said get off of me!"

The woman fell back against an adjoining sofa and slid down to sit on her legs. Her cotton dress had covered most of the floor, but left her arms and chest bare. She did nothing to cover herself, only stared at his expression with those eyes that seemed on the verge of crying.

"Need the coin, my family..."

Vassago reached down and put himself away before fastening up his pants. "That does not concern me. Why should it matter what a whore needs? It should be your place to concern yourself with what I need."

"You promised that..."

"Oh, just be silent! This is the worst day of my life and you madden me with all of your demands. Why can I not have a moment to think?"

A swift knocking at the carriage door broke up further discussion of promises, and before either of them could protest it swung open to reveal a handsomely dressed gentleman with short-cut brown hair and a neatly trimmed

mustache. It was Park and he appeared to be in a hurry. He climbed inside as the woman began to cover herself up.

"Bad to worse." Park sat on the sofa nearest the door and set a thick binder on the space next to him. He glanced at the woman on the floor, but soon returned his attention to the other sofa.

"Eckard is dead?" Vassago's blood ran cold.

"No, no. Nothing like that. He still lives, I believe. Baudin met with him this morning, the baron dismissed..." Park glanced at the woman again.

"Do not concern yourself with her. She is a common harlot I invited to remove my burden... not that she was able."

Her lips parted in surprise and she seemed ready to return to his lap. "My lord..."

"Close your mouth, we are speaking!" The three of them lurched to one side as the carriage began to move again.

Park pushed shiny spectacles further up his nose. "It is possible that she is a spy. It is probably best if we watch how we speak. The Akunians lack sophistication and hold no loyalty to anyone. They only care about coin and drink."

"Please, my lord. I would be happy to go if you would give me the silver coin that was promised," the woman pleaded.

Vassago raised a hand to silence her once again. "This is no spy, Park. It is a random beggar from the West Gate. She does not know anyone of significance."

"That may be so, but by virtue of hearing our words, she may no longer be as common as she once was. Will you take that chance?"

"Oh, alright, fine." Vassago turned to her with a stern expression and pointed to the door. The carriage was not yet moving so quickly as to prohibit a person from disembarking and if she delayed then she would have only herself to blame.

She stared at his finger. "My lord, you promised..."

With a sigh, he rolled his eyes and lowered his hand. "My footman usually holds my purse. Park, can you throw a coin at her so she will leave?"

Park gave a smile and let slip a small chuckle. Yet he did not check his pockets, instead he folded his hands in his lap. "It is surprising to see you so frantic today. You are usually the calm one."

"I have grown angry. All morning I have been absolutely on fire. And the truth would have it that I had some medicine earlier; it tends to make me excited when it wears off."

"Well, unfortunately, I do not have my purse on me either. Carrying coin can be dangerous in these parts. You are wise to task your footman with that job."

"My lord." Tears of anger and frustration had begun to stream down her face. "You said that I would entertain you for one piece of silver. You said it. I heard you say it."

Vassago swallowed. Glancing to Park, he gave a small gesture to the door. It was subtle, yet he did it in clear view of the woman and did not doubt that she had noticed.

The man needed a moment to comprehend his desire, but after a bit more gesturing, Park leaned sideways and turned the little handle before swinging the door wide.

Daylight poured into the cabin as the cobblestone streets of Akune blurred past the opening. The carriage had reached such a rapid pace that he was no longer able to determine which street this was.

Vassago made an attempt to seize the woman by the shoulder, but she quickly shook free from his grasp. When he attempted to grab her arm once more, she jerked her head back and tried to bite him. He leapt to his feet, grabbing hold of her with both hands, and stuffed his fist full of her hair. She cursed as he pulled her forward, putting all of his strength into lifting her off the floor even as the top half of her dress began to rip.

The woman aimed to brace herself against the doorframe, but her wrist had been quickly forced behind her back. When she tried to grab Park with her other hand, the man skittered out of the way. She surprised them both with a tremendous amount of leg strength despite her small stature. Her bare feet provided the traction she required, preventing her from leaning ahead toward the door.

Vassago finally let her go and raised his arms to brace himself against the cabin's roof so he could plant his boot in her back. The half-dressed woman spilled out of the carriage and onto the street. She raised her legs in an attempt to land safely, but she found herself at an awkward angle, managing only two or stumbling paces before colliding with a lamp post.

Vassago quickly shut the door as the hollow metal structure rang out like a church bell. Park stared in disbelief. Too soon for silence to settle in, a muffled scream erupted from outside and began to fade as the carriage continued on.

The two men exchanged glances as laughter bubbled up between them. If the peasant's purpose had been to lighten his mood, then Vassago had to admit she had done so. Beyond a doubt, it was the funniest thing he had seen in months. Even Park could no longer contain himself.

"Driver! Make haste! We may be pursued!" Vassago shouted between fits of roaring. The laughing continued for the next few minutes and Park had to stick a finger underneath the frames of his glasses to wipe tears away. Finally, Vassago retook his place on the rear sofa. "Nothing but trash in these port cities, you would think a man could get something rare and exotic from all the ships that come and go, but Odenkirk reserves all the quality women. Even Callow is a step up."

Park nodded. "Callow is nothing more than a brothel. Yet, I agree. It is better than here."

"These people force me to despise them."

"Well, perhaps it is time to vacation in Odenkirk. Baron Eckard appeared to think so."

Vassago's smile disappeared. "What? What is this?"

"Nearly said it out loud before your guest departed. He left for the capital."

"When? This morning? It is a trick. It has to be a trick."

Park shook his head. "He dismissed his staff and packed up his house with his own two hands."

Vassago squinted as he considered. He and Stella were not the most courageous of people, yet Eckard was the last one he would expect to give up and run. "Where did you hear this from?"

"Baudin."

"I hate Baudin. But, he would know."

"We are not friends, but I get along with him."

Vassago pulled out a sliding tray from above the sofa. It was crafted of thin wood and built into the wall of the cabin. With the dexterity of a man who had done it a thousand times over, he pulled a shard of purple crystal from his pocket and placed it on the tray before crushing it up with a stone cylinder. His eyes

slowly returned to Park's face as he mashed the crystal into a fine powder. "Bonti works for Goge now."

"The harbormaster?"

"Eckard had most of the dockyards wrapped up in an organization with..." Vassago pulled a steel tube from the cylinder and used it to snort some of the purple powder before using two fingers to pinch his nose shut.

Park gave a sigh and pretended not to watch. "Yes, I know who Bonti is. Just very unexpected to hear him change sides. If anything, I figured most of that rabble would have looted the docks and fled when Nath died."

"Goge paid them a visit this morning and started flashing a few of the coins he stole. Now those thieving bastards refuse to meet with my people. Lost it. They have lost all respect for the kingdom. It is as you said: they will do anything for coin."

Park squinted. "Are they not just slaves? Commoners? Why did they return to the dockyard when it was clear their work had ended?"

"They belong to Goge now. It does not matter what they used to be, all that ended when they started sharing those coins. The moment they put their filthy hands on my gold, they became criminals. Every one of them will hang. Treason is something I do not forget."

Vassago snorted another pile, yet this one was a great deal stronger than the first and sent his head spinning. He tilted the nape of his neck until it met the sweat trickling from his shoulder blades and reclined against the sofa for a moment.

Park sounded very far away. "He only stole it this morning. How much has he spent?"

He lowered his head to lock eyes with the man. His heart rate increased and his mind cleared. "Bonti refuses to meet. I must assume Goge spent a great deal. That is why we need to move quickly. For the good of the kingdom, we must be swift. Goge will no doubt absorb Eckard's holdings and much of my land as well. If we are smart about this then I think we can fix..."

"What of Odenkirk? The King? What of Callow?"

"That could take weeks! Months! Do you know how long it takes to put an army together? Even a hundred men would take at least seven days. After King Silden sets the other lords to retake Akune, he would task one of his favorites to run it. It could take a year or more before things return to normal. Eckard wast-

ed no time setting out for Odenkirk. He must expect to lead the King's men. And when he comes riding in with an army at his back, who do you think the city will be gifted to?"

Park pressed his lips together and glanced at the floor. Rubbing the palms of his hands against his knees, he seemed to consider those words. "That clever bastard..."

Pain shot through Vassago's body, a copper taste pooled in his mouth, his chest tightened and his eyes began to water. What some might consider a small heart attack had only just begun. And just before it became too much to handle, the blood in his veins began to sing. Vassago's eyes snapped wide with a new-found clarity. "Nath's death is an opportunity, but I was too slow to see it."

He pushed the tray aside and pulled out one of the larger chests from the side of the sofa. Flipping open the lid, he retrieved a folded white suit of exquisite design and set about removing his shirt.

Park was still contemplating Eckard and had tasked himself with staring at the floor. "I wonder if Stella knew."

"How is she? Any news?"

"No, after Rav was murdered, Eckard's people brought her home. Nothing since then."

Vassago examined the suit for spots or stains before hurriedly redressing himself. Although it might have seemed improper to disrobe in front of others, these were extraordinary times and they required decisive action. Park did not seem to mind in any event. "Well... she was close to Rav, I believe."

"Was she? I wondered if they hated each other."

Vassago smiled. "You certainly study us."

"That is my job. Well... it was my job."

He paused to gesture at the binder set next to Park, only noticing it just now. "And I hope you have done your job well. Did you do as I asked?"

Park picked it up and untied the string at the top, reaching inside to reveal several dozen pages of handwritten notes. "With such limited resources there was very little to be learned of Goge..."

He wished Park would talk faster. "And yet?"

"The things I learned beg you to reconsider this plan." Even the space between his words contained an eternity. Vassago had to repeat them in his mind to extract their meaning.

"No, no! No, no, no, no, no, Park! Now is the time to strike! If we do not stop this monster now, he could take over everything! Where is your sense of loyalty? Your courage? Your love for the kingdom?!" Vassago's hands started shaking. Although he knew it would pass, it made him wonder if he would be able to finish dressing himself.

"I am still uncertain as to whether or not he is the real Goge. But assuming he is, no army exists that can stop him. At least, no army we are capable of assembling."

He took a deep breath and attempted to steady himself. "If we can get close to him, we can help our brothers when the time comes. And if we get very close, I am certain that a dagger in the ribs will stop that beast. Speak to me of his weaknesses. Tell me, tell me what you learned."

Park began to page through his notes. "It is all elven history. All fantasy and riddles."

"Let me hear it!"

"First Empire: Goge served in something called an expeditionary force, which I suspect is some sort of soldier army term. He was stationed in a city I have never heard of. Charged with murder on several occasions, but never put on trial. Promoted once and then vanished completely." Park looked up to check if he was listening. Vassago gestured for him to continue. "The empire became unstable and fell into chaos. Goge shows up years later and founds the city of Akune, puts himself up as one of the Night Masters."

"What is that? I have heard that name before. What are these night masters?"

Park flipped through the pages until finding the correct sheet. "That was the start of the Second Empire. They were rulers of small cities, often called Mage Kings. It was some kind of national assembly, but they either lost their minds or they were always that way. Difficult to know, I am not sure how much of this is real or story, but most say these villains visited some pretty scary things on their subjects."

Vassago had finally managed to change his pants and shirt and began lacing up a pair of polished black shoes. "Scary? All rulers can be scary, it does not take a wand and a fancy title to scare the cattle. What frightens you?"

"The person who supposedly rebuilt Callow was a mage called Nazuka. They say she burned all the farms in her kingdom, killed all the women, castrated the men and made them call her the 'Queen Bee.'"

Vassago paused and glared across at the man. "That... that must not be true."

"Lord Yin ruled an area near Odenkirk. It is said he had over a million subjects and when they displeased him, he turned them all to stone."

He shook his head and resumed dressing. "Rubbish. Did you spend all night reading elven drama books? Is any of this reliable? Tell me something from a reliable source, not these tavern storytellers. I can get that nonsense from anywhere."

Park rummaged through his notes again and eventually sorted them back into a neat stack. "That actually came from several good accounts. And you know as well, from time to time, farmers around Odenkirk will dig up statues of life-sized commoners. Most shaped like they were set to work when it happened. And what does the Royal College Of Magic command when one is found?"

Vassago considered it a moment. He had a point. History was never a subject he pursued, yet he knew enough about the period to believe that things had become chaotic after the decline of the First Empire. Was it possible that an entire generation had gone mad? "Perhaps... I never wondered. There were a few found on my lands as well. We received a team to make sure they were destroyed. They warned us away from the area. Something about... remnants of magic use."

Park put the pages back into his binder and shook his head. "This could be the last time we see each other, Vassago. Your plan is too dangerous."

"Nonsense! So long as I know what kind of man he is, I can get close to him. I absolutely have to. The Islanders froze my accounts and called it a security concern. Now Goge steals our gold and I doubt he will allow us to collect taxes for the king next month. Things are getting out of control. And all of Toth is in danger!"

"These Night Masters... They were all mad in different ways. The only thing they had in common was that they were all scared of Goge. Perhaps it is a mixture of exhaustion and the lamb oil you have been inhaling which keeps you from being as scared as you should be."

Vassago shook his head again. "He is just a man. Do not underestimate me, Park. Thirty years ago, I commanded a resistance party during the Tragos invasion. We fought them for years. King Silden himself put a hand on my shoulder and called me a true hero..."

"I have heard this story before, my lord."

The carriage slowed to a stop, but Vassago continued. "Then it means I am still alive to tell it! He killed Nath and Rav, yes, but I saw him at the palace last night. What I saw was a tired old man who just wanted to go back to sleep. We can defeat him, but I need you. You must get word to the King and keep it secret. When Goge invites me to his side, you must make sure the King knows I am still his loyal servant."

Park pushed against the curtain closest to him and glanced outside. "Where are we? Is this the library?"

"Yes. He left that monster child here when he robbed us and I suspect he will return for her. How do I look?" Vassago stood up straight and used both hands to stroke the edges of his suit. His question was unneeded. He already knew that he had never looked so dignified in his life. So regal. So ready to fight.

Park stood from his sofa and quickly corrected the knots on the black bolo tie around his neck. It was something he had missed and he cursed himself for it. When the man was done, Vassago pulled a stiletto from the chest and inserted it beneath his belt at the small of his back.

Park's eyes flashed with concern. "Do not put yourself at risk when you see him. The Council of Redd claims to have buried his corpse a little over nine hundred years ago. Stabbing him may just make him angry."

Vassago thumbed his nose and gave a quick snort. "That damned elven cult claims responsibility for everything. If you had told me this last year, I would have suspected they were lying. Now that I have witnessed him, alive and well in Akune, I would make that accusation to their fat faces."

"I will have your remains shipped to Odenkirk if the man leaves anything for me to send." Park smiled. He was teasing, of course. This was the type of humor he normally enjoyed. But this was not the time for jokes, not now, not on the edge of destiny. This was the time for memorable statements.

"Park, when King Silden awards this port to me, I will remember your loyalty. And your courage."

He gave a nod and Park returned as much of a bow as he could manage inside a carriage. Turning to the door, Vassago felt a surge of hubris and stepped out into the afternoon sun. A glance to the right, a glance to the left and his blood ran cold. His carriage, it seemed, had parked behind another. Although this one was smaller and not as luxurious, it was clear that this was not the carriage of a commoner.

“Park. Get out here.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the man stuck out his head. “Second thoughts so soon? Apologies, my lord, I fear there is no need for me to risk my life as well.”

“Park...” Vassago slowly pointed. “To whom does that carriage belong?”

Park wormed out of the carriage and stood at his side. “It has a driver. Why not ask?”

“Why not you?”

“I find myself incurious.”

Vassago took a moment to glare at him. “It resembles one of the carriages the Islanders use from the dockyard to the market district. Can you speak with them and confirm my suspicion?”

Park glanced back. “No, as we discussed, I am not going to involve myself in this part of the plan.”

“I am only asking you to speak with the driver.”

“And what if Goge is sitting inside?” Park made a careful step back. “Was that not the purpose for visiting the library? Did you not say he would return to collect his monster? If I approach that carriage and find him...”

Vassago waved it away. “You worry yourself over nothing. There is no chance you will find him in the back of a carriage, the man does not use one.”

“What? He does not use a carriage? Then how does he travel?”

“Does he not fly? Fly... or ride around on one of the beasts he summons?” Vassago was quite serious; however, Park took it as a joke and began to smile. Unwilling to admit he had been serious, the smile was returned.

Park shook his head. “You had me for a moment, my lord.”

He gave his hands a good clap. “I had you, did I not? Are you sure you do not wish to come inside?”

“No, I will walk on from here, but I wish you great success.” Park gave another bow and turned away. Carefully navigating across the street, he glanced

back at Vassago every so often. Park seemed to question whether he possessed the bravery to proceed.

Several long strides to the staircase and a series of swift taps found him at the top, where Vassago nearly looked back to see if Park continued to watch, but the count rejected that urge. The smaller door creaked open and he stepped inside.

Something had transpired in the reception hall. Portraits had been struck down and there were pieces of splintered wood in the places where the floor met the wall.

He took a deep breath.

The library's director entered the chamber with a broom and glanced at him. Although he had rarely visited this building, it was strange to find it so empty. When Lord Nath had been alive, the place was crawling with guards. Lasting silence made him uneasy.

Vassago gestured to the director. "Is he here? Where is he?"

The man clenched his teeth and did not approach. Instead, he attempted to whisper from a distance. "You should not be here. Do not speak to me. I should not be seen with you."

"Little man, if you do not wish to be seen with me then tell me what I wish to know. You may not be speaking to Nath or Eckard, but I will flog just as well."

The director pressed his lips together and gave a nod to the stairs. Vassago pointed questioningly, prompting the man to nod again. He left at a quick pace and danced up the stairs with the vigor of a young man. When he got to the top, he felt a sharp pain in his chest and forced himself to relax before continuing.

The proceeding hall ran the length of the building. Although it was flanked by windows, it seemed all of them had been shuttered, which presented a rather gloomy atmosphere. On the far end lay an office. With the door half-opened, the soft glow of sunlight washed the shadows of people onto the walls. Vassago started toward it, but found his footsteps slowing.

"I guess so. I just need to put these into order." It was the voice of a young girl.

"We may be in need of a tutor. Someone who can continue her education. Can you recommend anyone?" Goge's accent was unmistakable. Vassago had

only heard it once before, yet he wondered now if he would ever be able to forget it.

"A tutor? I would not mind that position until you can find someone qualified. Reading is simple and she is very bright." A third person. Someone he did not recognize. With all the skill of an assassin, Vassago crept along the shadows and attempted to get a sense of the room without being discovered. The only person he could see was Goge.

The monster stood with his back to the doorway. "Then it is settled. Come by the palace the day after tomorrow. We can make it a bi-weekly event."

Perhaps it would not be required to talk to this creature after all. Perhaps the blade he had hidden under his belt could finally put this entire affair to rest. Vassago wondered what riches and fame would be showered upon him if he could end Goge's life right here and now. Vassago the hero, Lord of the Southern Cities. He wondered if even Silden could keep such an icon from sweeping up his lands. The man was old and his sniveling son would not be a rival of note. King Vassago Culross, great slayer of monsters and villains.

"Before or after midday?" The woman again.

But what of his gold? If Goge had hidden it or entrusted it to another, killing him might see the coins lost forever. Whereas it was true that the man's death would surely win the favor of the entire kingdom, Vassago would have a great deal of difficulty explaining where the gold had come from after enlisting their aid in finding it.

"Whatever you find convenient. Come in, Count Vassago Culross. My minions announced you when you arrived. Lurking in the hallway is starting to make them anxious."

He stood up straight and cleared his throat before stepping up to the doorway. "It was not my intention to interrupt, Lord Goge."

Goge glanced over his shoulder and gave a warm smile. "No interruption, we were just finishing up here."

The monster child was sitting at one of the tables inside the office. The woman perched next to her and although she seemed vaguely familiar, Vassago could safely say she could not be recognized. A commoner, from the way she was dressed. The child stuffed pages into a leather binder and paid no attention to him.

"May I take these with me?" she asked.

The woman smiled back. “You may have to get permission from the Lord of Akune. They could very well be city property now.”

“Akune can find no better caretaker and will entrust these documents to you, Lily,” Goge said.

The girl scoffed. “Akune can’t have them.”

Vassago carefully entered the room and stood at a corner of the table. He wanted to keep out of the way and yet remain the center of attention. This forced him to nervously reposition every few moments.

Goge did not seem to notice, but quickly ended this dance by proceeding to the far side of the room and waving for him to approach. “Nina, I need to speak with this gentleman for a moment. May I ask you to escort her outside?”

The woman nodded and did not take long to shepherd the child out into the hall, closing the door behind them. Although this was the scenario he had envisioned, it was not until he heard the door close that he realized how terrified he would be.

Goge’s strange suit, the short white hair and piercing eyes made his heart threaten to beat a path out of his chest. The scars were another matter entirely. It had been alarming to hear them described. Frightening to see them at a distance. Yet up close, Vassago began to wonder if this man was living or if he was a reanimated corpse as well. How could someone be so hideous and still live? He tried to avert his eyes and remember the words he had practiced.

“It is an honor to finally meet you, Lord Goge. I regret that our introductions were a bit delayed...”

Goge stalked toward him, hands outstretched and ready for violence. Every muscle in Vassago’s body tensed at that moment. He held his breath and felt even his heart pause.

The man grasped his shoulders with both hands. “Before you continue, I must confess that I admire your courage.”

“My...” Vassago gave a small cough. “My courage?”

Goge’s smile grew wider and he delivered a friendly pat on the shoulder before stepping away. “For coming here and speaking with me. It appears that the other nobles have acted on emotion, but not you. Not you. You placed that aside, and I can certainly understand why. In my opinion, diplomacy is the most powerful force in all the realms.”

Vassago felt every muscle in his body relax. "Lord Goge, I could not agree more. With our minds and words we can accomplish so much more than swords ever could."

Goge continued to the window and turned back to lean against its frame. "Then let us get to the heart of it. Do you seek an alliance?"

"Absolutely not. I would not be so bold as to assume myself your equal. Instead, may I pledge myself to your service? You are aware that my holdings already name me as the Lord of Culross County. In addition to bringing my lands under your direct control, I would serve in your administration. A position such as chancellor would suit my talents. It is similar to the arrangement I enjoyed with Lord Nath."

Goge tilted his head. "Was it similar? Was that how Lord Nath regarded you?"

"It was indeed. We had our differences, surely. As I suspect you had a few differences with him as well."

"How could you tell?"

He laughed at that and Goge followed once the joke had landed. Vassago did not expect the man to have a sense of humor. He placed two fingers against his chin as he chose the next words carefully. "As chancellor, I could begin the process of reconciliation with the Toth Kingdom. There are a few in his majesty's court who would support us. We could bring legal action to reclaim these lands and acquire official recognition of your status."

"That is a very interesting approach." Goge mimicked his gesture.

"Leave the details to me. Although it is no simple matter, I am confident they will see the value." It dawned on him that his plan may do with a few changes. If the fabled Mage King could be won over so easy then why dispose of him? It could prove beneficial to have someone like this as a figurehead.

"Regretful tidings, Count, that I shall not leave the details to you. Unfortunately, you are worthless so far as I am concerned." Goge turned to face the window, silently scanning the streets below.

Vassago blinked. Then again. He found his eyes scanning the room even though no one else remained present. Had he heard this man correctly? "My lord, if there is another way that..."

"Worthless, Vassago. You are a pathetic child and I have no need of you."

He stood up straight and folded his hands. “Please explain what you require, my lord.”

Goge turned slightly and made a broad gesture at the world outside the window. “Look around at the people who are being tasked to govern my city. Priests, merchants, servants, attendants, clerks. Do you fit among any of them? What possessed you to think you could walk into my presence and take a seat at the table? The world has changed and it was foolish to believe you would continue to play an important part in it. You have become worthless. Less than worthless – an annoyance. Do you understand?”

“My lord, you do not know enough about me to come to such a conclusion. I can be instrumental in your victory. The way in which you have been conducting yourself will accomplish very little. All that it does is create enemies, but with my assistance, you can indeed win.”

“I have already won. Have you listened to a word I have said? Vassago, your aid is not required.”

Vassago put up a hand as if to beg interruption. “My lord, I do not believe that is true. If you knew me then...”

Goge rolled his eyes and turned back to the window. “Your name is Vassago Culross, although that is not the name your mother gave you. You were born fifty-six years ago in a small fishing village east of Tamworth. Your mother was Haruka and your father was a sometimes-pirate called Mera. You grew up with two older brothers in a small house overlooking the southern ocean until it was eventually razed due to neglect. One brother took his own life, the other died of illness. Thirty years ago, the Tragos invaded. They claimed Akune and pushed out. They attempted to take Callow and failed, as they had seriously underestimated the city’s defenses and sent most of their force north to Odenkirk. After a lengthy war, Silden’s men threw them back. At the same time, a resistance movement started in Akune called the ‘Black Masks’. Allegedly run by a minor noble named Vassago Culross, they proved exceedingly effective at sabotage and harrassing strikes. When the Toth Nobles finally arrived to retake the city, they claimed that Vassago himself was the one to open the North Gate.”

The man gave a scoff; it was subtle, but Vassago noticed. It had not been his intention to lean against the table, but at this point it was all Vassago could do to stop himself from falling over. Goge continued.

“Yet... that is not what happened. Most of the Black Masks, including Vassago Culross were captured and killed three days prior. When Silden retook the city and famously burned the Tragos ships, he asked to meet with the renowned leader of the Black Masks. You were the only one to come forward. You, a lowly traitor. A man who knew Vassago was dead, because you had aided the Tragos in capturing him.”

Vassago stared in amazement, placing his left hand flat against the table for balance. “How could you... how could you...?”

“How could I know? Lord Nath knew, or at least he would have if he had read the reports littering his office.”

“I never told anyone. Not anyone.”

“How naïve. You were fed a river of wine by the person assigned to interrogate you. In his words, you became so drunk that you mistook your own servant for a trespasser and stabbed him in the eye with a bread knife, not realizing your error until the following day.” Goge glanced back at him and grimaced at the sorry sight he had become.

Vassago's mind raced as he attempted to recall what and to whom he had confided. He had recounted these early days to so many people throughout his life that he struggled to recall if he had ever told a different account. The accurate version. Eventually, that night came flooding back. “Park...”

“Ah, the sting of betrayal...”

He pulled his hand from the surface of the table and balled it, giving the table a swift thump. All those years of bickering with Eckard, fruitless while Nath's spies played them against each other. To make matters worse, Park had been Eckard's man. Yet, if Goge was to be believed, then he was in Nath's pocket the entire time.

“That lice-covered prick! That gutter-blooded, spying, snotty little rat! He betrayed my trust!”

A chuckle rolled from Goge as the man turned his attention back to the streets below. His voice was smooth and even, almost philosophical. “Can one such as you truly be betrayed? You are a wretch. Everyone who betrays your trust could only be accused of defending themselves.”

Vassago's lips pressed into a frown and he found himself glaring at the man's back. With his right foot, he took a practice step forward and noted that he had not made a sound. Another step and another. He silently slid his right hand in-

to the small of his back and wrapped five fingers around the blade that would put Goge back in his grave. The many vices he had employed to pick him up this morning seemed a waste. Anger, it seemed, would give him more than enough courage to do what had to be done.

As he pulled against the handle, something cold clamped onto his wrist. Vassago jerked his arm and attempted to turn his head to see what had crept up behind him as a horrible realization filled his thoughts. It was a ghost. However, the grip of iron and freezing air on the back of his neck did not immediately convince him. It was not until a series of spectral ringlets began to coil around his shoulders and legs, squeezing tightly and forbidding him from looking back.

The anger drained away as he stood motionless, his hand still locked on the blade handle behind his back. Goge finally turned away from the window to face him. Vassago wanted to look away, but found himself unable.

"Have you heard nothing of my words? Those who are not to be trusted should never trust another. If anything I have mentioned could be called wise, it would have to be that." Goge stared at his expression. "Breathe. Breathe or you are going to pass out."

Vassago's incessant heartbeat had obscured the fact that he was not breathing properly. It was not that he was holding his breath; rather, he was breathing so quickly that no air was getting in or out. He tried to force himself to exhale, but his chest remained unresponsive.

Gradually, the tendrils that wrapped his arms and shoulders began to loosen, allowing him to lean forward. He recognized the expression on Goge's face as concern, or perhaps pity. As pain crept up his chest, Vassago leaned forward even further than he had intended and exhaled the contents of his lungs. The air was ripped from him so violently that it emitted a long, somewhat monotonous moan until it was completely expelled. The remainder of his fall to the hardwood floor was accompanied by the release of his arms, allowing him to catch himself.

Vassago waited there, on his hands and knees, like a dog. And taking such deep breaths that anyone below might have believed he was yelling for his life. The stiletto slid from where it had been concealed and clattered to the ground, but he made no effort to locate it. His vision was obscured by tears, and all he desired was to bury his head in his hands.

"My lord..." he finally managed to say. "These are desperate times for me..."

Goge waited for a break in his sobs before attempting a reply. "Well, yes, yes they are. In fact I would wager you have no idea just how desperate they have become."

"Everything was tied up in Nath's scheme and now... I must have this, Lord Goge. It is..."

"Listen. Listen." Goge moved closer and lowered himself to place a hand on Vassago's shoulder. Although the man was now within arm's reach, he could not bear to look up at him. "Listen to me. When I killed Nath I assumed the nobles would flee in fear. It was a message. A warning to the rest of you. That was your chance. That was your moment." Fingers grabbed his hair and jerked his head upright, forcing Vassago to face the man. At first he imagined it was the ghost which had done it, yet he realized his mistake when he saw the cold seriousness in Goge's eyes. "Listen! I was telling you to run away. Run away or you will die. It confuses me why that was not clear."

"I must... I must... I must... all of that coin... My Lord Goge, please do not turn me away. I am destitute. Just a little bit, if you could return even just a little bit... Have...Have mercy, my lord. Have mercy."

Goge released his grip and stood. "You are worthless to me. Do you understand? Coming here was foolish. Understand?"

"Half my life. It took half my life to raise all that gold."

"It is gone now. Most was donated to the temple. They will surely spend it all if they have not already done so."

The sobbing stopped. His eyes refocused as the tears began to drain. Vassago lifted his chin to get a better look at him. "You... you gave it away?"

"Yes, it is of little use to me. The point was to cripple those who meant to keep control. People such as you."

Vassago dropped his voice to a whisper. "...you are truly the cruellest of men."

"Run away, Vassago. Run far away. This game has ended. You will either start a new life somewhere else or you will die. I leave the choice to you."

"Please.... please, just return a little of it."

Goge gave a sigh and stepped over the discarded blade on his way to the door. His minion, now disinterested, floated sideways into the wallpapered surface nearest the door before Vassago could get a good look at it.

“I have two ladies waiting for me outside. It is at this time that I will take my leave. If it is your wish to go on living, then I suggest you avoid me in the future.”

Goge departed without so much as a backward glance.

\*\*\*\*



Lily found the quality of Ren's carriage to be outright mesmerizing.

Specifically the horses: magnificent beasts with glossy coats and silver harnesses. During the winter months, observing their every trot past the orphanage windows had been her principal enjoyment. She loved them all, yet these proved to be exceptional.

A rich bronze color washed into their manes – not simply brown or yellow, but a golden chestnut. Their long faces and small noses added to that elegant appearance and featured large, dark brown eyes, which held a deep sense of wisdom and affection. She wished she could sit in the front with the driver rather than play squire for a beast like Goge.

He was watching her. Lily hugged the binder to her chest and pretended to look from her window. Despite the attention, she knew he was only concerned

with one thing: whether or not she was still wearing the pendant that had been tied to her belt. Although it was never removed, she did not wish to give him the satisfaction of pulling up her topcoat to prove it.

It might be better to ignore him. This morning alone, he had nearly killed two people. Three if you counted the one that Miss Nina had saved. For nearly two days Lily had been in his company and at first, it was thrilling enough just to get out and see the city.

And yet, his actions had made it clear that he was a monster, not a person. Witnessing his interactions with others filled her with anxiety, as she knew that these helpless people were just moments away from danger. He was a shark with an insatiable desire to kill and so far as first impressions went, the scars on his face proved to be an adequate indication of who he was.

Deep creases carved themselves in all directions across his skin, mottled in the way only burns can be. It was clear he might once have been an attractive young man, but had seen so much violence that now it was impossible to tell where the scars stopped and the wrinkles began.

It was not these ancient wounds which bothered her. What bothered her was the fact that his eyes did not blink when he inflicted harm. There was no expression, no clenching of teeth, no sneering, no grimace. He simply stretched out his hand and ruined lives. It was as if the entire world had been populated by people who were not real to him, nothing but shadows in a dream, undeserving of sympathy and incapable of feeling pain. Simply catching sight of his eyes made her feel like a rodent trapped in a pit of snakes. Or perhaps with one particularly large snake who had swallowed the others.

But why did he not kill her as well? Why did he hesitate when she blocked his path? What could he be planning? "Why do you want me to read?"

"What?"

Lily slowly forced herself to look at him. "You invited Miss Nina to give me lessons. And I am very happy about it, but why? Is there something you will get?"

He scoffed. "My intentions are not as complicated as you might imagine."

"So why?" she repeated.

Goge rubbed his brow with a hand. He was clearly not accustomed to explanations. After a few long moments, he replied, his voice clipped and a little

too loud. "The only thing worse than a slave is an illiterate slave. If you continue to be uneducated, then you shall continue to be useless."

Lily squinted. She held the book closer to her chest and shook her head. "I am not your slave."

She held his gaze and did not speak until her hands began to shake. The air grew heavy with the weight of his disapproval.

"Then what are you? Tell me what you are. While you are considering an answer, tell me how many demons are in my city. Where are they? Why are they here? Surely, you must know something. What is the purpose of disguising a red-sorc Nakiri... no, an untitled Nakiri spawn. Why hide it? Why leave it in the poor house?"

"You hate me..."

"I do not despise you. Incomplete puzzles are what I detest and you, so far, have not proven to be a piece that fits. Whatever nonsense deposited you in my city should come forward and explain itself. Offer confession or beg forgiveness when they are uncovered."

Lily squeezed the binder even tighter and decided to turn her entire body to face the window. His terrifying stare had become too much. Although his question was a fair one, she had already come to the conclusion that if Goge knew how little she remembered about arriving in this world, he might no longer have a reason to keep her alive.

Instead of trying his patience, she decided to focus on the world outside. From the angle of the sun she could determine that it was late afternoon. There would not be many hours left in the day before it began to sink behind some of the larger buildings to the west.

As the carriage got closer to the palace, she could see the huge iron fence that surrounded the estate and caged the emerald green grass. It smelled freshly cut, trimmed to perfection. She focused her attention on it, trying to ignore his angry stare.

"Lily, it was not my intention to..."

The carriage came to an abrupt stop and caused them both to lurch forward. From outside, the voice of the driver cried, "My passenger is the Lord Goge!"

These words were followed by the familiar sound of scraping metal as the gate began to open. It did not surprise her that the citywatch had returned to

guarding the palace gates. What surprised her was the fact that they were letting his carriage pass through without a moment of protest.

Lily brought her voice to a whisper. "They let us come back?"

"Desmond must have spoken with them. I have to visit the temple, but you will remain at the palace. There are a few matters to which I must see."

A doorman dressed in fine attire greeted them as their carriage drew near the courtyard. Lily did not recognize the young man, but he appeared friendly enough. He had light brown hair and was slightly thicker than the average Akunian. Although daylight persisted, he had brought with him an unlit lantern, holding it high in preparation. He bowed and extended his hand to help her down the last step, but Lily had already hopped over it. Goge motioned for the driver to wait.

Stepping inside, she found the palace alive again. Not with furniture, paintings or statues, but with people, chores and... something more. What she thought might be her imagination turned out to be music coming from nearby. Not just music, but also the sound of cheering, dancing and clapping. Lily glanced around to try to get a sense of where it was coming from. After a brief moment, Goge moved past her to open the double doors at the right of the stairs.

Inside, they found ten maids gathered in a circle, all clapping along to a man with a flute and Vera dancing in the center. She was dressed in a red, billowing gown that clung to every curve of her body. Her dark brown curls gave her away, even though she was hiding her face with a feathered mask.

Goge planted his feet shoulder-width apart and began to shout over the music. "What madness is happening in this room?!"

The music stopped. The startled maids all shifted their eyes and held their hands in mid-clap. But not Vera. She continued to dance as if nothing was wrong. After a few additional twirls and hops, she danced from her place in the circle and stretched her arms out to either side. "Welcome home, my love!"

Lily took a deep breath and readied herself to step between them, blocking the way and saving Vera from certain death.

However, this time Goge simply lifted an eyebrow. "Vera, what is the meaning of this?"

"Just in time to ask me for a dance." She leaned forward and tried to take his hand. But he did not cooperate with her darting clasps.

"Are you drunk? Mad? Possessed?"

"Dance with me! How else will I know if you are the man of my dreams? Unless you are a cripple, I suppose?"

Goge shook his head. "Are you not supposed to be cleaning or something?"

"Yes, I should be cleaning." Vera began to stroll back to the circle as she gazed over her shoulder. "But I was waiting for you to return home so you could ask me for a dance."

"Well, I am... I am here now..." He put a hand on Lily's shoulder and pulled her along, retreating back into the reception hall before slamming the door shut.

Desmond emerged from the stairs with a folded white cloth over one arm. "Welcome back, my lord. Dinner is still being prepared. Do you have any baggage that requires attention?"

Goge attempted to regard him, but found himself glancing back to the side room as the music resumed, followed by clapping. "No, no baggage and I will not be here long. Please see that Miss Lily gets something to eat and is put to bed on time. Desmond...?"

"My lord?"

"Has Vera been acting strange lately?"

Desmond glanced to the closed door and back, a confused expression washing over him. "Not that I have seen."

"Is she keeping up with her duties?"

Desmond gave a nod. "Yes, my lord. She manages the staff quite well."

"Fine. See to Miss Lily and I shall return before morning."

"My lord, before you depart, you have a visitor in the lounge. He insisted on seeing you and I have not yet been educated on what sorts you prefer to be turned away."

Goge sighed. "Yes, yes, summon the visitor to the courtyard and I shall see him off. From now on send everyone to City Hall. Accept those who can prove an invitation."

"As you wish, my lord." Desmond offered a hand to Lily.



Atrix was a dashing young man who wore glasses and styled his hair short. He dressed comfortably for travel and wore his silver and red-trimmed cape to

show he was a member of the Royal College of Magic. He sat in one of the few chairs littering a sinfully empty lounge in the east wing, right across from a stack of small oil paintings, which he had taken it upon himself to inspect. His curiosity was hard to satiate and he was on his third landscape depiction when the door opened.

The well-dressed man from earlier stepped in and made a sweeping gesture toward the corridor. "Sir, Lord Goge will receive you in the courtyard."

Atrix gently returned the small painting to the top of the stack and stood up. He gave a polite smile and crossed the length of the room before noticing a young lady by the man's side.

His breath caught, he expertly attempted to conceal his surprise by transitioning to a polite bow. It might have worked if he had been able to peel his eyes off her. "You must be Lily."

"Hi."

"I am Atrix Kestrel."

She dropped her eyes to the floor. "Hello."

"Please forgive my manners, but I have never before seen one such as yourself." Atrix approached like a predator, ready to pounce. His eyes flicked up and down her horns. "May I ask... what type you are?"

Lily did not respond, instead inching herself behind Desmond.

"Please forgive my curiosity. I do not mean to be rude."

"Lord Goge awaits you in the courtyard, sir." Desmond repeated his gesture.

Atrix folded his hands behind his back and gave an embarrassed nod. So far as missed opportunities went, this encounter threatened to haunt him for years to come. A genuine abyssal, category six, and of unknown origin.

Yet by the rules of common courtesy, he was forced to bury his questions and depart. He tried to keep up his smile and like a scorned dog, pushed himself down the hall and out into the courtyard, leaving the demon and the well-dressed man behind. At the end of the corridor, a solid oak door opened without protest.

In the courtyard beyond, he could see an elegant carriage waiting by the main entrance. As he approached, the driver appeared to have made a joke to an older gentleman with short white hair... Could this be him? The imposter who took Rav's life? Atrix continued forward as his eyes carefully scanned this man.

His black suit appeared a bit worn and he carried a cane in his hand. Yet he did not seem to hold it as if it were a walking cane, but rather some kind of weapon.

Nervous energy surged in waves. It was a sensation he was familiar with, but not quite like this. The presence of magic, both Aether and Ignis. Intense, pulsing, fields of power that seemed to press up against his skin like a sunburn.

He gave a slight bow when noticed. "I am Atrix Kestrel. May I ask your name?"

The old man shifted his attention. He passed the cane from his right hand to his left and turned ever so slightly.

Atrix halted in mid-step and put up his hands to show that they were empty. "Peace. I offer no threat."

The carriage driver's smile faded and he pretended to be preoccupied with the reins as the old man forced his voice into a polite tone. "Who are you?"

"Atrix Kestrel, His Majesty's Royal College of Magic."

"Why are you here?" The real question was this. The one you rush toward, even if it means omitting half of the first answer. Atrix reasoned that if the mage did not attack after that first question then he might not attack at all. Instead, it was quite possible that he would only issue a warning or a threat.

"I am here to speak with Lord Goge."

"What about?"

Atrix kept his hands raised and he resumed his approach. The strangely dressed man stood motionless, seemingly relaxed, yet he never took his eyes away from Atrix's hands.

"Contingency spells." Atrix finally came to stand before him and kept his smile a friendly shape.

"I have no time for games."

He kept his hands raised. "The truth is that I came here to see if you were indeed the real Goge. But now there is no doubt in my mind. You have contingency spells attached to you. I have never felt so many."

"Such nonsense today. Why should that matter?"

"They are quite rare. No one has been able to cast a contingency spell in over six hundred years."

The man scoffed. "Ridiculous. A contingency spell is just a delayed cast with a condition. Such things are basic."

"A condition..." Atrix dropped his hands and shook his head. "You speak like the mages of history. It has been centuries since anyone even wrote about a casted condition."

Goge stared at him a moment. His expression gave nothing away. Finally, he pointed at the carriage. "Get in."

Atrix did not hesitate. With a renewed smile, he quickly helped himself up into the cabin and sat on the back bench. After whispering something to the driver, the old man climbed in and sat across from him.

Goge cleared his throat and laid the cane on his lap for a moment so he could rub his eyes. He seemed poised to answer Atrix's questions, yet waited for the carriage to start moving before he spoke. "Aether sight. Do you know it?"

"Minor elemental detection? Yes." He gave a quick nod.

"Cast it."

Atrix lifted his right hand and leaned forward. "On what? On the carriage? On the bench?"

"On anything."

He summoned power to his grasp with a quick roll of his wrist, bringing his fingers into a crooked gesture. A small blue light erupted just beyond his reach, releasing a spark that engulfed the carriage itself. The interior of the cabin glowed softly and shined around the edges. The wood became more vibrant, and the texture of the leather darkened until it was almost invisible. The glow faded after a brief moment. Atrix had expected some shout of alarm from the carriage driver, but heard nothing.

Goge stared at him rather uncomfortably. "That is completely wrong. That is not Aether sight."

"I do not understand, the spell activated as it was intended."

"Did your people just memorize gestures?"

Atrix lowered his hand. "Yes. Yes, of course. I mean, there is a bit more to it than gestures, but gestures are the cornerstone."

"Gestures are meaningless." He said it so easily. With such confidence. It was as if the implication annoyed him.

"Are they really?"

"When did this start?"

Atrix squinted. "When did humans start using magic?"

"When did this style of teaching begin?"

His eyes wandered as they considered the question. "Primarily... after the purge."

"What purge? Explain." Goge propped an arm against the window and leaned his head against his hand.

Atrix inhaled deeply. "Six hundred years ago... Well, there was no Toth Kingdom. This whole area was portioned into a lot of smaller countries in the Zin Alliance. War broke out with the Getch Tribes in the far north. A truce was declared, but fighting did not cease entirely. Throughout the years, mage groups persisted and even recruited outsiders to act as proxies. Eventually, both the Getch and the Zin began to collaborate against these mage groups. Things became very, how shall I say... dramatic."

"I will assume that is why you referred to it as The Purge."

"Yes. Well, there are a great number of books written on that topic. I do not want to bore you with details. Following this affair, most of the nations involved brought their laws in line with the Oceanic Council. To put it simply, they banned spellcraft."

Goge scoffed. "Banned? How does one ban spellcraft?"

"With swords, I believe."

"I find that difficult to understand. The mages of my day would not have been phased by such a threat."

Atrix gave a shrug. "Perhaps that was a contributing factor. These nations were ruled by mage groups at the time. These groups were not so much prohibiting the practice of magic, but rather its teaching and instruction. We endured a lengthy period of intolerance. Of course there were people who resisted. Small groups and cults carried on... well, two hundred years ago..."

"You all dusted off the books that had not been burned and decided to start over."

He gave a nod. "In a manner of speaking."

"Your method is garbage." Goge stretched out both hands, palms facing each other. Without warning, a torrent of electricity spanned the distance between them. The light was so intense that it chased away every shadow in the small cabin and nearly forced him to avert his eyes. It might have been startling for most, but not Atrix. There was no heat, no sound. It was an example of energy in its purest form.

"Magic is not a ritual or gesture. This practice we call elemental spellcraft is the very fabric of nature. Ignis and Aether exist everywhere. We are bathed in it. Your soul is capable of creating a negative space and when you reach out, you are pulling at the threads of reality itself. This is not something you can do through memorization. You must understand what it is that you are touching and how existence will react if you alter it. I swear, you College Mages are a bunch of blind children, fumbling around on the floor."

Darkness reclaimed the cabin as the display ended. Goge rubbed two fingers of his right hand together. Atrix jerked upright as a soft blue light swallowed his eyes and glowed with the same energy which had encompassed the carriage. In an instant, the curtain drew back from his gaze and he could see everything: currents of red and blue, energy moving in and out of the cabin like a tornado. Soundless yet ever present, it poured through the world at unimaginable speeds. He could see through the floor, through the street beneath and the buildings on either side. It was enough to make him hold his breath. Intangible existence. Matter and energy dividing into infinity, the flesh that clung to Goge's bones was nothing more than a pulsating echo of improbable madness. Was everything magic? Or was magic everything?

Goge's movements came unhurriedly as he waited to make sure Atrix was paying attention. His fingers pulled at a small strand of silvery red and twisted it into a knot before he dragged his thumb across the thick end. "Delay."

He twisted his wrist to wrap the base around the loop of the knot. "Conditional."

His hand repeated the process. The same spell was crafted all over again and layered on top of the first. Finally he enclosed them both in his grip and pressed them against the handle of the carriage door.

Atrix stared at the brass fixture with a lover's intensity. Condensed reality: too volatile to be contained in a simple metal and too delicate to be seen with the naked eye. It held the shape it was given and waited patiently. Before he knew what he was doing, Atrix raised his hand and reached out for the door handle.

He paused. "May I?"

"Of course, that is why I made it. You need to understand how magic interacts before you can ever hope to use it properly."

Atrix rubbed the small metal handle with his index finger, disturbing the threads. The magic unraveled before his very eyes and the effect activated. A small red spark manifested above his finger and made a small pop. Twice.

Goge's gaze drifted from the threads to Atrix's expression. "Do you understand?"

"I..." Atrix was still hunched over, staring at the door handle in disbelief. A smile crept across his mouth. "I have learned more in the last few seconds than..." He sat up straight and aimed his right hand at the empty seat across from him. It was a pressing curiosity. A spell of his own. He began the gesture for 'Fireball', a spell he had cast thousands of times before. The minute he began the gesture, tendrils of red energy leapt from the environment and sat at the end of his finger tips. The young mage stared at the tiny strands as they shimmered against his skin, ready to be shaped. So many years of practice and this was the first time he had ever seen what he was actually casting. He canceled the spell and leaned back against the bench cushions. "Students who were blind, studying something we could not see. We pursued the knowledge of the ancients and never had a chance of attaining their heights. Now, everything makes so much sense."

Goge glanced out the window again. "Well, I am glad you got so much out of it, because I must tend to other affairs. Shall I have my carriage drop you somewhere?"

Atrix ended the detection spell on his eyes and struggled to focus. He wondered how he could ever look at the world the same way again. "Thank you, but there is no need. I... I think I shall walk. There are a few books I must consult and it seems I have a great deal of research ahead of me."

Goge disembarked as the carriage slowed to a halt. He turned to retrieve his cane. "As you say. Pursue these revelations with caution. Avoid reckless experiments until you are confident of the outcome."

"Master Goge. Thank you for this."

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Mister Atrix." Goge gave a nod and started up the steps of the Mynar Temple.

The estate of Hana Stella was especially quiet this afternoon. There had been no visitors, no business and no servants. All three were missing.

The Baroness sat behind her desk. She wore her favorite dress today. It was elegant, regal and very expensive. Her strawberry blonde hair was styled to perfection. The room was silent except for a pendulum clock against the far wall. She stared past it, in a state of shock, for an unknowable length of time.

The coin, the gold, the treasure was gone. All of it. The markets were in chaos. Nath was dead. Eckard had left. Vassago was leaving. Her position ensured a quarter-share of nothing. Much like Vassago, she had invested everything into Nath's plan. With no one willing to extend credit and no means of raising further gold, she would not even be able to pay for a decent meal.

The world had become a surreal reflection of its own self. Leaning slightly forward, she stood from her chair and crossed the room to the door. It made no sound as it opened. Stella walked down the corridor and into the dining room. The room was too bright. She carefully adjusted the drapes to draw the perfect lighting for the room, which was a task typically performed by her staff.

The servants had all gone. Released early. Perhaps gone forever. On the dining table lay the message looked over during the afternoon break from a contact at the docks informing her that the Dockworkers Union was in serious jeopardy. A simple note. Only one page with just a few sentences.

Both hands made short work of the letter. Then, she gathered the pieces and returned them to the table. No sooner had she set down the articles than she spied an open bottle of wine. She pounced upon it, but quickly realized her error when she discovered the bottle to be empty. And at that moment she broke.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" The bottle shattered as she threw it against the far wall and showered the richly woven carpet with shards. "How did this happen? How?!"

She crumpled to the floor, sobbing. The makeup she had spent hours applying began to run. "This is not fair!"

The baroness bowed forward to stand, but her head hit the table's edge. Instead of recoiling from the wound, she braced herself against the edge and flipped the entire section over. The table and its contents rolled into the chairs, knocking them over. Glassware shattered, and candles fell from their silver holders. She flailed her arms and grabbed the chair next to her. She hurled it at

the window with great effort, hoping to hear the sound of broken glass, but it missed and bounced against the wall instead. She collapsed once again.

After rubbing the wet streaks from her face, Stella surveyed the devastation and finally noticed a large man peeking in from the hallway. It was Baudin. He wore travel clothes and his hands were covered in dirt.

"What happened here?"

She feigned confusion. "I do not know. I was having a bit to drink and must have fallen."

"Are you alright?"

"I am fine. Just a little drunk. I shall clean this up."

"Where are your servants? Shall I summon someone to...?"

"No!" Stella's face twisted with rage. She jumped to her feet, but nearly stumbled into one of the remaining chairs. In retaliation, she kicked it over with a grunt.

"I do not need anyone! He shall not take my property! He can eat dung that son of a whore – I do not care who he thinks himself to be!"

Baudin backed away carefully. "Baroness... I can help you. I..."

She placed both hands on her head and tried not to pull out her hair. She did not want to cry again. Not with Baudin watching.

"I have a plan. It will work. Trust me." Baudin drew a little closer.

She glared and took a deep breath, her voice somewhat calmer. "Alright. Tell it."

"Well. Tonight, our friends..."

"Our friends..." Stella scoffed and stumbled across the carpet, waving Baudin away and unconsciously looking for another bottle of wine among the wreckage. There were none.

"Our friends..." Baudin repeated. "Are going to cause a disturbance."

The Baroness looked up. "What kind of disturbance?"

"It doesn't matter. I know where the gold is."

"In City Hall? In the basement? In the pocket of that criminal? Everyone knows where the gold is! Do you think you can just walk in there and take it?" She spat those words at him, but even as she did she began to see the merit of his idea. "Do you think... do you really think... he would leave it unguarded? ... Do you think any of the watchmen would alert him?"

Baudin smiled. "I can assure you they will not."

"So you are planning to sneak in and steal it back?"

"That is exactly what I am planning. We won't be able to get it all. But with a wagon and four or five strong men we can get at least half."

Stella stared at him. For just a brief moment, a ray of hope shone into her desperation. But what was there to risk? She offered a sad smile. "I never liked you, Baudin. You are a greedy, unwashed, ugly, impoverished merchant, a terrible ship captain and you are unable to carry a tune to save your life. But I am happy that you stayed. You will have your men."

He inhaled and reflexively put one of those filthy hands against his chest. "Afterward we will be forced to flee."

"Most certainly."

"And I want half."

"That is fair." She could already see one of her assassins slashing open his throat.

"Partners, then?"

"Partners."

\* \* \* \*

Nina sprinted through the alleys of Akune like a wild animal, a hand pressed against her pocket to muffle the sound of coins. She practically ran all the way home, where she and Hammond occupied a series of cramped rooms. Many people wouldn't even consider it a dwelling. Once a bustling night market, these buildings had become a collection of sheds hammered together to form shelter that mostly didn't leak. He had a room by the entrance and she had a room overlooking the street below. Definitely not the type of place one would call comfortable, yet they had furnished their place with enough good memories to call it cozy. Hammond had only just woken up when she burst through the door and dropped nine gold tani on the table.

"Good morning!" She was almost able to dance, despite her exhaustion.

His eyes locked on the coins. "Nina..."

"I've got something big to tell you!"

His eyes were as big as the coins before him. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Your debt is paid! I paid him a lot more than what you owe!" She lifted her arms as if expecting a hug.

"Nina..." He looked from the coins to her face and then back to the coins. "Nina, where did you get this?"

"I earned it from Goge."

"Goge?"

"Yeah. He gave it to me."

"He... gave you gold?"

"This is happening, Hammond! It is really happening!" She bounced delightedly, hoping he would ignore what she just said. "Now we can buy a proper ship. Our own ship! Set sail for open waters with our own ship!"

"How did you earn this?"

"I killed a dragon."

"You what?!"

"Joking." She reached out a finger and touched the end of his nose playfully.

"Nina, I am serious. We have some kind of monster living in the palace and now you tell me he is giving you money?"

Nina shrugged. "Well, yeah. I mean, I guess technically he isn't giving me anything. But I earned it. I tutored his little girl."

"The freak with the horns?!"

Nina narrowed her eyes. His words had not been unfair and she was not immune to the gossip circling the market district. But after getting to know young Lily, it just felt wrong to hear people say such things.

She folded her arms. "She is not a freak, Hammond."

Hammond went back to staring at the coins, but dared not touch them. "Do you know how crazy this sounds?"

"No, I don't. I don't see what's so crazy about teaching someone to read. In fact, I think I am pretty good at it."

"Nina... I'm going to ask you a favor."

"What?"

He exhaled and reached out to touch the edge of her arm. "Don't go anywhere near that palace. I'll find a way to pay you back."

"No..." Her features softened as she pulled up a chair next to where he was sitting. "You don't need to pay me back. Don't you see? I did this for both of us. So we can finally..."

"Finally what?"

"Don't get mad."

"I won't get mad."

She poked him with a finger. "You always say you won't get mad and then you get mad."

"But I won't get mad this time." His eyes were the most honest she had ever seen them.

"Goge offered me a job and I said yes." No sooner had the words left her mouth than Hammond's eyes snapped wide with panic. "Look, the nobles are done in this city. I can't work for them anymore and neither can you. So I said yes. I said I would keep teaching his girl. And that sounds fine, but I just want to get away from this city. I want to sail away. Far, far away. So you decide, Hammond, you decide. Do I work at the palace or do we sail away?"

"I don't want you to work at the palace, but... Buy a ship? Are you serious? You think the two of us can handle a trade lane?"

She scooped up the individual coins and held them up to his chest. "And about five crewmates. Look at all the gold we have now! We can buy a proper ketch. One with a double mast."

He stared down at the coins, still not willing to touch them. "If we fill the hold with wool... Wool sells really well in the western islands, I hear."

"And then we can live like nobles! Real nobles!" Nina grinned and laid each coin on the table, playfully stacking them into a small tower.

"Eat wild fruit every morning. And fish for our supper."

Nina placed a hand on his hair and resisted the urge to stroke it. "Sleep under the stars."

He gave a nod. "Aye."

"A real bed." She gave his shoulder a small kiss. Gently, through the fabric. In the moment, it did not seem like there might be anything wrong with that. It was a simple kiss. Something that good friends did.

"No debts, just freedom."

"Our own boat."

"I would swim in the ocean every day. And maybe buy one of those silly hats the merchants wear."

Nina closed her eyes and leaned in to kiss him on the lips. Her hand on his, she felt him pull away. It was not the first time he had rejected her affection, yet

this was perhaps the first time she had gone this far. Slowly, she opened her eyes and took in the surprise on his face.

Nina averted her eyes from his confused stare, casting them to the floor as she eventually withdrew. "Sorry."

"No. It is not... It is not you."

"It was just..."

"I did things." Hammond whispered so quietly that she had to hold her breath just to hear him. "When Eckard sent us out of the city... he would have us kill people. People didn't deserve... People that never did anything wrong."

She looked back up and for the first time in a while she could see shame on his face. With both hands she reached up and tried to brush it all away. "None of that matters anymore. We are free now. Free of everything. We can sail away and leave it in the past."

"I want that." His smile returned. Hammond gave her a pat on the shoulder and stood up. "There is so much to do! I have to talk to Commander Teric and apply for a trade license at City Hall. We can leave tonight, or maybe in the morning."

"It may take longer than that to find a good ship. We don't want to buy the first one we see."

"Then you do it. Go find us a good ship and I will take care of the paperwork. I don't want to spend any more time here than we have to."

She stood up and embraced him. For a moment he seemed confused, but returned it. It was all too soon before they parted, both of them ready to go about their separate ways. She gave a wave and took a few steps toward the door, looking back to give him one final smile. It was happening. It was really happening.

\*\*\*\*

Goge proceeded to walk straight through the temple. What a sad sight. It was enough to make him wonder if Mynar was the god of disrepair. The forward-facing hall was well-kept, but beyond lay an endless procession of corridors and rooms in disarray. David's people, the vagrants known as "priests," were nowhere to be found. The sound of activity, however, soon reached his ears and led him back outside.

Years of abandonment had turned the east side of the temple grounds from a garden into a barren wasteland. Hundreds of tents took over the dirt yard, their silken colors commanding the eye. Each was made of good material from fine merchant's stock, but thrown down and assembled with obvious haste or little care.

It was impressive how fast Father David could spend coin, although in fairness, this amount of coin had a way of simply spending itself. Nearly a hundred carpenters, toolmakers, merchants and craftsmen were hard at work with only a handful of priests sprinkled in. As Goge surveyed the staging area, he planted the tip of his cane in the dirt and realized that it was safe to assume word had gotten out. Not even a full day and wagons were already delivering fresh lumber. The previously mentioned 'poor' whom the temple had been tasked with sheltering appeared to have been recruited into more lucrative vocations. It reminded him of something he heard many years ago: 'It is always the hungry that make the best cooks.'

David approached from the edge of the property and tried to hide a proud smile. "Mynar provides."

Goge used his cane to gesture at supply tables, which had been erected on both sides of the camp. They were piled with everything from clothes and tools to dry foods and bedding. "I find 'swift' to be a poor description for you."

David glanced in the direction of the distant gatehouse along the east wall. "The city guard does not appreciate it. They say we are attracting the unsavory. Threatened to shut us down."

"I shall persuade them to reconsider."

"Just like that? Is it so easy? You give a word and they forget their grievance?"

Goge inhaled sharply through his nose and turned toward the head priest. Taking a step closer, he brought himself face-to-face with the scrawny man. "You never stutter when my back is turned. Why do you believe that is?"

"I... well... it is not to say that... my Lord Goge, no offense is... intended when..."

Goge shook his head and took a step back. "Calm. Calm yourself. It is difficult to speak with you when you are unable to be calm. It is my goal to be obnoxious, it should not be yours. Your task is to be a bastion of stability, so calm yourself."

David's face darkened for just a moment. His eyebrows came down and his lips adopted the start of a sneer. "My words were spoken in haste and it was not my intention to sound as though I was questioning your authority. This is only the second time we have met and already I have been threatened, harassed and now everyone treats me as if I am the city's most wealthy noble. This is not a life with which I am proficient and you put too much on me. Do you not understand that I am a priest? I know nothing of your authority, or politics, or how you plan to handle the citywatch."

"Perhaps you know more than you admit. Because it will be that easy. As you said, I shall give the word and they shall forget their grievance. Granted, they will be allowed to protest my decision. However, the truth remains that they are replaceable... whereas you are not. They would be wise to remember that." He kneeled down to inspect the soil. Although Goge had never been a farmer, he had expected to see something a bit different when he ran his fingers against the dusty ground.

"Terrible!" A man called to them as he approached. He was middle-aged with specks of gray coming into view across the edges of otherwise short brown hair. With a flashy pair of goggles on his forehead, his appearance was professional, but still quite rugged with articles of leather mixed in with his expensive attire.

David waved to him. "This is Caleb. An architect I hired this morning. Met him in the market. We are going to turn these tents into homes."

"I saw you looking at the dirt." Caleb smiled at Goge and gave a quick bow. "It is terrible. Way too much sand."

"I was thinking about buying up the properties across the road and using that instead," David mused. "However, that could become rather expensive."

"It would be a shame if there was a fire in that part of the city. It would make the land a lot cheaper." Caleb's smile quickly faded as David and Goge both glared at him. "What I... what I mean to say is..."

Goge pointed. "Why not expand through the east wall?"

"How would that work?"

"I could punch a hole in it. Strip as much of the north and south sections as you need. The other side is empty right up to the outer farms. It is all just fields, really."

Caleb's eyes ran up and down the wall. He pressed two fingers to his lips and gave a nod. "That would certainly give us a lot more space. However, I doubt Akune's new lord would allow it."

David blinked and glanced at Goge. "Oh, I think he might."

Caleb glanced from person to person before it finally set in. He leaned against his back foot as his eyes widened. "Oh, by the gods, that is him, isn't it?! Do not tell me that is him. Sir, are you him?"

Goge set the tip of his cane against the dirt. "Yes, I suspect I may be him."

The architect took two steps back and bent at the waist, attempting to give the lowest bow possible without falling to his knees. "My sincerest apologies, my lord. I did not know you would be here today. 'Saw Father David talking to someone and thought you were a supplier or a... Oh dear, I am making it worse..."

"Enough. I have had my fill of awkward apologies for the day. Let us return to the topic." Goge gestured back to the wall.

Caleb straightened his back and flashed a smile at David. "Absolutely. Absolutely, my lord. Expanding this plot to the wall and beyond will certainly make construction a lot easier. Cheaper too, I would wager. If vertical construction is no longer required, we can start looking at a much longer complex."

Goge faced east and scanned the horizon, trying to get an idea of the size it might one day become. "No need to stop there. The city can easily support multiple projects if your employer agrees."

Caleb stepped a little closer and turned to face the same direction. "Hold on. If you are just going to get rid of the wall... would you mind if I quarry it?"

David raised a finger. "Don't we...?"

"I find no issue with that. What do you propose?"

"With that much stone I could easily make a patchwork foundation for the expansion. With some cheap pitch and all this sand... yes... yes I could build out this section. It would be unrivaled."

"Do we not require the wall?" David finally asked.

They both looked at David. "For what?"

"Well, perhaps, in the event that the city is attacked by the King of Toth?"

Goge rolled his eyes. "David, if King Silden is able to best me, I suspect a few stones piled atop each other would do little to protect you. If such an event comes to pass, you are better off begging his mercy and blaming all of this on

my influence." Goge returned his attention to the architect. "I like this idea, but you will need to discuss it with Father David. He is the authority on these matters."

Caleb shifted his eyes and David glanced over the tents once again. "Well... you are the architect, Caleb."

The man gave a nod and turned his head to smile at Goge. "My lord, if you do not mind me saying, your reputation is not deserved."

"Truly? What is it they say?"

"You have been on everyone's lips since I arrived. Some say you killed Lord Nath with magic. You travel in secret and hide in the back of hired carriages. That you are some kind of evil wizard from the before times and you are here to murder nobles. Oh, and my favorite thus far, that you are accompanied by some kind of horned goblin."

"A goblin. Ha!" He chuckled at that, nearly slapping the man on the shoulder.

David offered a thin smile. "Yes... How amusing."

"Well, gentlemen, let me return to my duties." Caleb gave them both a thin bow before walking back the way he had come. His staff members, still collecting around the supply tables, greeted his approach.

David shot a suspicious glare. "You are a bad influence on them."

"Me? You must be mistaken."

"You are always talking about the future. You get them excited. It gives them hope."

"No, David, you are the one giving them hope. My methods are direct and my motives quite obvious. So long as everyone stays out of my way, we need not be at odds."

The pair began to stroll further into the encampment. David's eyes wandered from tent to tent to make sure no one was close enough to hear. "Why are you doing this? We never discussed what you hope to gain."

"I am waiting for someone."

David straightened up at that. "Who?"

"No one you know and this is not something you should concern yourself with."

"The Temple, of course, appreciates... We all appreciate the aid, I am sure, but Caleb is correct. People are talking and I deserve to know what we have become involved in."

Goge rolled his eyes. "Archpriest of Mynar... here to lecture me on what he deserves."

"I do not even know your last name." David tried to whisper, but his unformed question came out sounding a bit strained instead.

"Yes, you do. Goge."

"Goge is your last name? Well then, what is your first name?"

He paused and gave David the serious expression from earlier. Although he hoped it would have the same effect, there appeared to be a bit more confidence in the priest. "David, I am a very busy man. Where is this coming from?"

"It occurs to me that everyone is calling you Goge, but no one seems to know anything more than what is mentioned in books. Which is very little. Outside of your rivalry with others of that age, all I have been able to find is accounts of the city's origin."

"Zyxin," Goge finally said. "Zyxin Goge, Disciple of Aegis and Ninth Chair of the Qar Panopticon."

"Aegis... Saint Aegis? The Saint Aegis?" David's expression turned from concern to horror in the span of a moment. "He was..."

He took a deep breath. "Yes, the right hand of the emperor. A thousand years ago the entire world knew who he was. And they were wrong about him. He was much worse than anyone realized. It could be said he was human when Nicodemous sent him to this world, yet that was not my experience when I entered his service. To think, that some would refer to me as an abomination when Aegis spent his days eating souls and destroying worlds. It baffles me. It simply baffles me."

"People of that era may have lamented the fall of the empire, but I tell you that the world was better off without them. Forget him, forget the Empire, forget Nicodemous, the Night Masters and Qar. Those days are gone and we are fortunate for that. You, David. You have people here who require a priest. Living people. The power to help them is yours. Regardless of my plans, you must keep your mind focused and work closely with Beatrice. Do that, and you can reshape this city into a shining jewel – the pride of the entire southern coast. From one edge of this..."

"Who is Beatrice?"

Goge stopped in his tracks. With a slow turn, he gave a rather long stare.  
"You met her this morning. When you sought me out at City Hall."

David shook his head. "I did not go to City Hall this morning. I meant to, but I ended up..."

"Ended up' what?"

"I went home to the farm for a few hours and..."

"What farm?"

David's eyes were pulled into the distance. "My family's farm. The place where I grew up."

Goge centered himself on the man and searched his eyes. "What madness is this? What is wrong with your memory? David, look at me. Has anyone been practicing spellcraft on you?"

"N... No... I just got a bit distracted this morning. I went back to the farm to see how it looked."

"How did it look?"

His eyes darted around, but finally settled on the horizon once again. "Just as I remembered it."

"Describe it to me."

"It was... It is a small place with a red barn and a field of corn. There are three or four cows and a dozen chickens. Set on a hill, a stream runs through the middle and there is a wooded area behind the house."

"When was the last time you visited?"

"This morning, I told you."

"Before that."

"Oh, it has been many years since I last saw it. It was claimed by fire when I was very young." David stuck his fingers underneath his glasses to rub his eyes, but Goge quickly slapped his hand away.

"Look at me, David!"

"I... I just had to go and see the farm again."

Goge grabbed the small man by a shoulder and nearly shook him. "Where were you before you went to the farm? Think, damn you!"

"I told you! Why... Why are you angry?"

"You will come with me or I will have you carried." Goge pulled the thin man toward the road. A few priests and workers gawked at the sight, yet no one seemed eager to involve themselves.

\*\*\*\*



アメジン  
TIFFENEAU

His carriage moved swiftly through the residential district. It was almost dark as the sun sank through inkling colors in the west. It had been a long day and

the carriage was no longer moving as quickly as it once did. One by one, Goge removed wands from his bandolier and gave them a quick inspection. David sat across from him, his eyes marveling at how the objects passed in and out of view.

“It is called a bandolier. I wear it around my shoulder like a sash. Eyes alone will not see it.” He did not look up at the priest, but could feel the man’s eyes on each wand that slipped into his hands.

They did not need to be sorted, only checked to be certain they were properly charged. From time to time, a spell or an environmental effect might cause one to drain. It was a rare occurrence, but not the sort of thing he wanted to deal with in the middle of battle.

David spoke softly. “You appear very disturbed by all this.”

Goge glanced up. At first, he had taken issue with just how calm David was behaving. But after a moment, he was forced to let it go. The man was still partially under the spell’s effect. Also, this was probably the first time Father David had ever sat in such a fine carriage.

He returned his attention to the wands and attempted to keep a reassuring tone in his voice. “There are three possibilities. The first involves a mage who has set themselves in opposition to me. Altering the mind of a realmer is no easy task and we can safely assume it is beyond anything that your Toth mages can achieve. It requires a disciplined use of Aether and a keen understanding of how a human mind functions. Something so elegant would take decades of practice for me. The spell could not be infused into an item, nor could it be made ready before the encounter. No, this mage is a specialist and very talented. A genuine threat. A threat that has developed an interest in myself and, by extension, those around me.”

David leaned forward and put his head in his hands. “When I think about it now, I do not understand how it was so convincing. I saw it. I saw a place that no longer exists and I did not question it. Not even for a moment.”

“You did not question it because it never happened. Whatever transpired was obscured and later replaced.”

“What are the other possibilities? You said there were three.”

The carriage came to a halt and from outside came the stirring and creaking of leather and links as the driver put up his reins. Goge put a hand on the door.

“Forget them. The more I ponder it, the more certain I become. We are dealing with a very experienced mage.”

“I will not be of any use to you. Every time I try to remember what actually happened, the false memory...”

“It will pass. Just breathe deep and focus on the present. Leave the rest to me.”

David glanced at his hand on the door. “What are you going to do?”

“My yurei travel underground and require a few moments to position themselves. We will wait for a –”

“Yurei?” David attempted to interrupt.

“– moment before disembarking. When we step out, we must assume he will be watching.”

“Yurei? What do you mean by yurei?” the priest repeated. “I said I would show you what I remember, but I will not be a part of your... your...”

“My plans? My agenda? My goals? I should inform you that you have no choice. You were the one this mage chose to interrogate. You are in this up to your neck.”

“I will not be a party to violence, Lord Goge. Perhaps you believe that you intimidate me, however, however, well yes. Yes, you do. Sometimes you scare me to death. Especially earlier when you spoke of Aegis.” David put his hand up to his forehead as if a sharp pain had returned. “Yet...”

Goge took this opportunity to correct him. “Listen to me, you ignorant fool. Changes were made to your mind. The memory will pass in a day or two. The purpose was not to convince you of something; it was to make you forget. Breathe deep, clear your thoughts and follow me.”

The door opened and Goge stepped out onto the cobblestone streets of a relatively wealthy neighborhood. Three rows of city-homes pressed together, each sharing a wall with their neighbor, with only a stonework path in place of a yard. David disembarked behind him and threatened to step forward into the quiet cross-street, but Goge’s outstretched hand stopped him.

“Wait.” He scanned the area carefully.

David dropped his voice to a whisper. “I meant what I said. I will not be a party to violence.”

“Then be a party to peace. If he presents himself, I will allow you to mediate.”

“And what if he attempts to run?”

“He will not.”

“How can you know that?”

“He will realize my pets have surrounded the district.”

David turned to walk away, aiming himself down the eastward street and starting off. “No. I will not be a part of this. You intend violence.”

Goge attempted to grab his arm, but did not want to take his eyes from the nearby buildings. “I do not intend violence, David. David! I am investigating an attack upon you. This is an investigation. We are investigators. Is that not what your god expects you to do? Is he not the god of knowledge?”

David paused. “You know he is not. Why do you taunt me with such words?”

He tried to remember the conversation from yesterday. Mynar was the god of... peace? Love? It was something simple yet hopelessly naïve. The kind of religion you would find on one of these far-flung worlds. Justice, perhaps? He may as well have been the god of annoyance if his followers were any indication.

Goge decided to play it safe. “Do not be offended. I was testing your memory.”

“Did you... did you not call me a fool moments ago?”

“Yes. I believe I did.”

“Was that a part of your test?”

“No, you were behaving like a fool.” He could not help himself.

David turned away once again. “I shall return to the Temple. I will not stand for such abuse.”

“You will not stand for violence. You will not be abused. David, it only serves to make my role difficult if you continue placing conditions upon me.”

David halted in mid-step and turned back, raising his voice so loud that it echoed off the nearby homes. “Your role is tyranny and murder!”

Goge finally pulled his eyes from the surrounding structures, frustration seeping into his expression as his lips peeled back. “Damn you, David! I get enough of this from Lily!”

David glared and gave a small sigh. He shrugged and attempted another approach. “It... it is not my intention to be difficult... This is very frightening for me. You invested in our temple and I am grateful for that. Yet by doing so, you have tied our fate to yours. How can we live with such a burden?”

Fate! Goge remembered now. Mynar was the god of fate. For a moment he considered writing it down. Instead, he waved away David's words and forced a smile. "The fault is surely mine. You ought not to be expected to accept this and I understand that."

"We are just going to talk to him?"

"I will not be the first to strike," he lied. "Is this where it happened?"

David glanced at the cross-street. "Yes."

"And you were on your way back to the temple?" Goge led the way and gestured for David to follow. No other carriages parked or passed at this hour and the few persons who passed on foot gave them a wide radius. Less of a crossing, the street branched off into a T-shape with the fourth ending in a dirt path, which cut across several blocks.

"I remember that the bag was heavy. Heavier than I thought it was going to be. When I passed through the merchant district I saw a vendor selling saddlebags that could be slung over a shoulder. 'Considered buying one, but I did not."

"Why?"

David gave another sigh. "There are better ways it could be spent. A little discomfort would not be the death of me."

"And what happened when you arrived at this point?"

"Then I... I remember the farm." The priest grew still and his eyes began to glaze over.

"No. You were here in the street, walking, surely not down the center. Do not think back to it. Just use your eyes and tell me what is different. What has changed?"

"What has changed? Everything has changed. Everyone has gone home."

Goge raised both arms to the many homes around them. "Good, now look around. Who has gone? Who might you expect to see?"

David looked from right to left, his eyes settling on the east-most corner. "...there was a beggar sitting over there. She had a torn shirt and a small box. I remember that she..."

"You rejected the merchant, but you would not have ignored the beggar."

David stared at that spot. "No... No, I do not believe I would have. In fact, I am sure of it. If anything, I would have directed her to the temple."

"And that is the point where your memory ends?"

The priest grunted and closed his eyes. Leaning forward, he put his hands on his head. "Why can I not...?"

"Stop." Goge gave him a pat on the shoulder and slowed his pace. "Do not try to remember. The spell is long gone, but your memories are stacked like a trick of cards. Choose the wrong one from the deck and they all spill out. Focus on the ground. Avoid the memory and answer me this: if this woman were still here, where would she be sitting?"

David pointed at a spot on the ground. It was a fairly unremarkable stretch of stonework that lifted up from the street and provided a sidewalk. Beside the dirt and filth one might expect to see on the streets of Akune, there was nothing of significance outside of a small wooden box. Goge tapped it with the tip of his boot.

Stepping around that spot, he pulled up one side of his overcoat to obscure his other hand and summoned a bright ball of Aether. He cast Minor Elemental Detection, Radiant Release and Cascading Vision. Wisps of energy wove patterns on the ground as David stumbled backward.

"What is that? What did you just do? I felt something."

"Nothing." Goge glanced around one more time. How was that possible? Was his adversary such a master of Aether that he could completely remove all trace? "There is nothing here."

David strained to watch. "What you did there. I felt a great warmth in my bones. Was that your magic?"

Goge looked around again. None of his yurei had reported anything unusual and there seemed to be no trace of spellcraft on this block. Even the minor spells he had just cast would remain detectable for days. And yet this man had altered someone's mind in broad daylight without leaving a speck of evidence. It was either extremely unlikely or extremely impressive.

Nothing had been altered, nothing cast, nothing remained. The entire effect began and ended with David's mind.

Goge pointed at a nearby home. "What color is that roof?"

"Brown."

"And that one?" Goge moved his finger to the right.

"Red."

"And that one?"

"Brown."

"And that one?"

"Lord Goge, I do not understand..."

"David. It is important. Tell me the color of that roof."

"That one is also brown."

"And that one?" He moved his finger again.

"That is an empty field." David rolled his eyes.

Goge did not move his finger. "David..."

"Lord Goge, I do not understand what you..."

Goge was quieter now. His expression, grave. "David, take another look at where I am pointing."

"It is an empty field. Maybe there used to be a house there, but not now. Nothing but tall grass."

Goge gradually lowered his arm and drew his cane; holding it in his left hand, he used the right to retrieve a silver wand. The metal was pure enough to hold a great deal of charge and this particular wand had been infused with 'Disintegration'. A master of Aether would not have difficulty defending himself against it. However, to do so would only serve as theory confirmation. He activated a small pin under his coat. This one was shaped like an elephant and held a single charge of 'Modified Reflection'. It would last for the next half hour.

Although such a trick passed as simple enough to detect and dismiss, Goge was frequently surprised by the number of opponents who fell victim to it. Of course, it would only work once and was only effective on common Ignis and Aether spells, but he speculated that this pin had a higher body count than the wand in his hand.

"David, take the carriage back to the temple. I shall check on you in the morning."

"Please, at least tell me what you plan to do."

"Return to the temple, David." Goge stalked toward the house that Father David had been unable to see. He summoned power to his hand and gestured at the building, confident that Necromancy was too rare a magic for even this mage to have guarded against. Twenty living creatures inside, spread across two floors. None of them were moving.

David caught up to him. "Not until you tell me what is going on."

Goge readied the cane in his left hand and the wand in his right. "If you insist on staying, then wait here."

The front door was not barred or locked. Quality wood made a tight seal that resisted anything less than a firm push open. The hardwood floors did not give off a hollow sound as he stepped inside, and this allowed him to move in relative silence.

The interior appeared to be very well decorated and recently cleaned. There were no wards or traps, at least, none that could be detected. Five Akunian city-watch sat on the sofa and stared blankly at the wall in front of them. Candle holders sat on desks and tables, unlit. Two more citywatch stood in the kitchen, unmoving, peering out the windows. Goge took a quiet series of bootsteps toward the stairs unchallenged. Each step creaked under his weight as he climbed to the next floor. It was not a large house and the presence of so many watchmen made it seem rather cramped.

The upstairs was not as bright and Goge could barely make out the silhouette of more guards posted in the hall. They stood like statues and remained inert to his intrusion. A single ray of light came from under the door at the end of the corridor. Goge took the last few steps carefully as he traversed the watchmen that crowded his path. Although he was sure to be nearing his target, the lack of defenses made the situation all the more confusing. An adversary with this type of skill and experience would surely have coated the walls and floors with all manner of magical defense. Yet he saw none.

The door opened before he could touch it. Peering inside, he noticed a large chair and a woman within its padding hunched over a table. Aged and somewhat plump, she sat facing him and was dressed in a faded gray robe with a brown woolen cowl. Goge kept the weapons at his side with the utmost care not to raise them. Until this person decided how she wanted to proceed, this was as much of a greeting as he was prepared to give.

With her right hand she drew a deck of cards; pulling a tarot with her left, she placed the image on the table face up. It was death. She drew another card and placed it alongside the first. It was also death. She drew a third and a fourth as he watched. All death.

"The cards foretold your coming. They did not warn me that you carry an infernal weapon. Obscenity to the gods, I have been expecting you." The old woman did not speak with the voice of someone her age. Instead, it sounded as if someone were trying a little too hard to play the part.

Goge sighed and put his wand away. Taking a seat in the chair which had been set out for him, he attempted to get a glimpse of the woman's face. Unfortunately, the dim candlelight draped long shadows across them both.

"You are swimming in illusion magic. Your cards are no different. Remove these insults or suffer my choice of spellcraft."

The old woman paused as she placed the deck on the table, as if startled by what he said. "I am not your enemy. But the cards..."

Goge summoned a ball of crackling red energy to his hand and raised it to shoulder level, his eyes never straying from his target.

The woman held up her hands in surrender. "Alright... Alright..."

The walls, the candles, the table and chairs peeled away as the illusion unraveled. Light from the sunset washed through the room as the drapes disappeared as well. The woman changed into a beautiful version of herself with a fox tail and pointy ears covered in light brown fur. Her hair was reddish brown and well-styled. Thick white trousers and a shirt under a gold trim vest completed the more honest truth. The fabric was obviously not local.

Goge briefly glanced around the room. Not spacious, as he had been led to believe: a bedroom with a four-post bed, a small night stand, an armoire and a selection of oil lamps. The table and two remaining chairs were hardly as grand as they once appeared, taking up a fraction of the space.

Goge lifted an eyebrow. "A succubus? Another demon in my city?"

"I am no demon, if you please."

"You are an abyssal who uses illusion. Succubus is what you are called."

She sat up straight and placed her hands on the table. "My name is Tiffeneau and I know what a succubus is. It is true that I am a Domainer, yes. But not an abyssal. I am Kitsune, if you please."

"Never heard of that." Goge placed the cane across his lap, still glaring.

"We reside in the domain of Zao. We do not involve ourselves in the eternal war."

His cold expression faded as he placed the final piece of the puzzle. "You are the one who brought Lily here. That glamour was your doing."

Her fluffy tail snaked around and momentarily wrapped across her chest. "Yes, we separated and I watched from a distance."

"Why are you disrupting my affairs?"

Her features twisted angrily for just a moment, but slowly relaxed before she would allow herself to speak again. "Lily was fine where she was. You are the one who complicates matters, if you please."

"Me? Was it I who came to your city and began altering the memories of your servants? Please forgive me if that is the case. I did not realize that it was, in fact, I who was found to be living in a house with dozens of mind-numbed citywatch. Please accept my apologies."

She set her jaw and straightened her back, seemingly not a fan of his sarcasm. "These men are very well paid. Each of them donate a small portion of their earnings every week. I can understand that you might find this..."

Goge leaned forward, a rare moment of anger flaring across his face. "This is not your personal playground! Make your living somewhere else! This is Akune and these are my servants!"

Tiffeneau stood up so suddenly that her chair scraped across the floor to punctuate the departure. Goge gripped his cane, but relaxed the moment she turned her back to him. She made a step toward the window, her triangular ears standing on end. Perhaps she had done it by accident, yet any hope of tactical advantage had been surrendered in that one moment. No serious opponent would have turned their attention away for the sake of a dramatic gesture. Goge felt all of the tension drain just as fast as it had arrived.

"I mistook you for something else. I apologize. These days have been difficult. Difficult for us both."

She paused by the window. Her breathing was still agitated, but seemed to slow as something caught her attention on the street below. "That priest. That is how you found me. 'Knew he was trouble. When he opened that bag and showed me how much coin he was carrying, I realized my mistake..."

"Please. Sit back down. I have questions."

Tiffeneau turned slowly and seemed to bury her pride for a brief moment. She retook her chair and sat across from him. "I tried to erase all memory of myself, if you please."

"You did a very good job of that. He does not remember you at all."

"Coins like that were destined to be counted, I dared not take any. 'Sent him away as fast as I could and still you found me."

"He mentioned visiting a farm in the middle of the city."

She smiled for a moment. Maybe it was the memory of diving into David's mind or perhaps it was the expression Goge made when he mentioned it. She glanced off to the side and decided to change the subject.

"Who are you expecting?"

Goge raised an eyebrow. "Expecting?"

"It is my responsibility to keep watch on Lily. On your first night here you took her to a tailor and told them that you are expecting someone. Who is it, if you please?"

"I do not recall."

"If you start lying now, this discussion will not go far."

Goge suppressed annoyance. "No one you know."

"Tell me anyway."

"A personal rival from another realm."

"Does this rival have a name?"

He sighed in annoyance. "Ethan. Are you happy? You have received information that is truly worthless to you."

"Hard won. A small victory for me. Now you get to ask a question, if you please, although I already know what it is."

"Why did you hide a red-sorc Nakiri in my city?" Goge leaned back and the chair creaked in response.

"Your city? It was not your city when I arrived."

"It has always been my city. Now tell me."

She shook her head. "Lily is not a red-sorc. She is an Amanozako, if you please."

He glanced up at her eyes. "I am not up to date on abyssal nonsense. What is that?"

"Something which is sacrificed. With every ten million born, the gods require a sacrifice."

"You stole their sacrifice?"

Tiffeneau gave a brave smile. "No. The role of thief was not offered to me and I am not sure how many hands she passed through since."

"Could you not have brought her somewhere else? The City Of Mists? A paradise domain? Surely there are better places in the domains."

"This is not some ritual. A celestial would slay her just as fast as her own kind. The gods want her dead. Both the old and new."

Goge shook his head. "I find it difficult to believe that the gods would pay attention long enough to actually agree on something. Why so much attention?"

"As I said, she is Amanozako. Every ten million born, a Nakiri emerges with the power to slay the devine. Their pact demands they eliminate it. This is no game. It is the reason they count their young and test them. If they fail to find and eliminate her, the consequences for them will be unimaginable."

Goge calmly closed his eyes and used his thumb and forefinger to massage the area between them, letting out a slow groan. The kitsune did not continue.

"Are you aware of how mad this all sounds?" He focused his tired eyes back to her. They did not convey acceptance. In truth, he was not yet certain whether or not he believed her, but he had no reason to think that she would have gone to so much trouble for such a poor lie.

She spoke softly. "I am aware of how it must sound to someone like yourself, but that does not make it less true. Regardless of what we believe, the Nakiri are convinced and they will stop at nothing to find her."

He shook his head. "Why would you bring her here?"

"You think it was my choice? I was not aware of what she was. They gave me the girl and I departed. Had I known what she was I would have refused, if you please."

He clenched his teeth. "Why did you choose this world? Do not avoid my question."

"Your mind forbids my power and I am unable to read it!" She squeezed her hands in frustration. "Do not hold me to impossible standards when I have spent years on my own and must choose my words so carefully! This world was not where I intended to bring her! Our chain is broken. I was to deliver her many years ago and found their agents laying in wait. Now there is no one to whom I can bring her and I am alone."

Goge stretched out his right hand in an effort to calm her. "Consider this. Surrender the girl to them."

She shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment. "They would kill me. None have admitted she is gone and their servants have been searching the realms. These are well-practiced at recovering those who seek to stay hidden. It is only a matter of time. It seems... It may sound cruel, but the best thing for

us is to leave her on her own and keep our distance. If you please, it is all I can think to do."

"Are there others who might know you had a hand in this?" Goge slowly rose and straightened his suit.

"None that live. What will you do?"

"For now? Nothing. If they are not already here then there is no need for haste. Ships leave Akune all the time and she can easily find herself on one of them. Continue to distance yourself and I shall do the same. For now, I suspect it would be better if you started living like a realmer. No more glamours, no more stealing. Go see Beatrice at City Hall and take a salary. It will be easier for you to hide when you are not behaving like a Succubus... if you please."

The kitsune hinted at a smile. She stood up from her chair to give a grateful bow. "I appreciate that. Good luck to you, Lord Necromancer. You may still need it."

"You as well."



## Don't miss out!

Visit the website below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Yuka Miura publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-CDQOB-RRNND>



Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Also by Yuka Miura

**The Kannazuki Series**

The Beast Of Akune  
Beast Slayer



## About the Author

Yuka Miura was born in Akashi, Japan and now lives in Osaka with her husband, two dogs and a twenty-four pack of post-it notes. Yuka enjoys collecting old records, cooking, and making her own kombucha. She has worked as a freelance writer since 2019. You can follow her on twitter at [@X\\_Yuka\\_Miura](https://twitter.com/X_Yuka_Miura).



